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August 5, 1896.

No. 928.

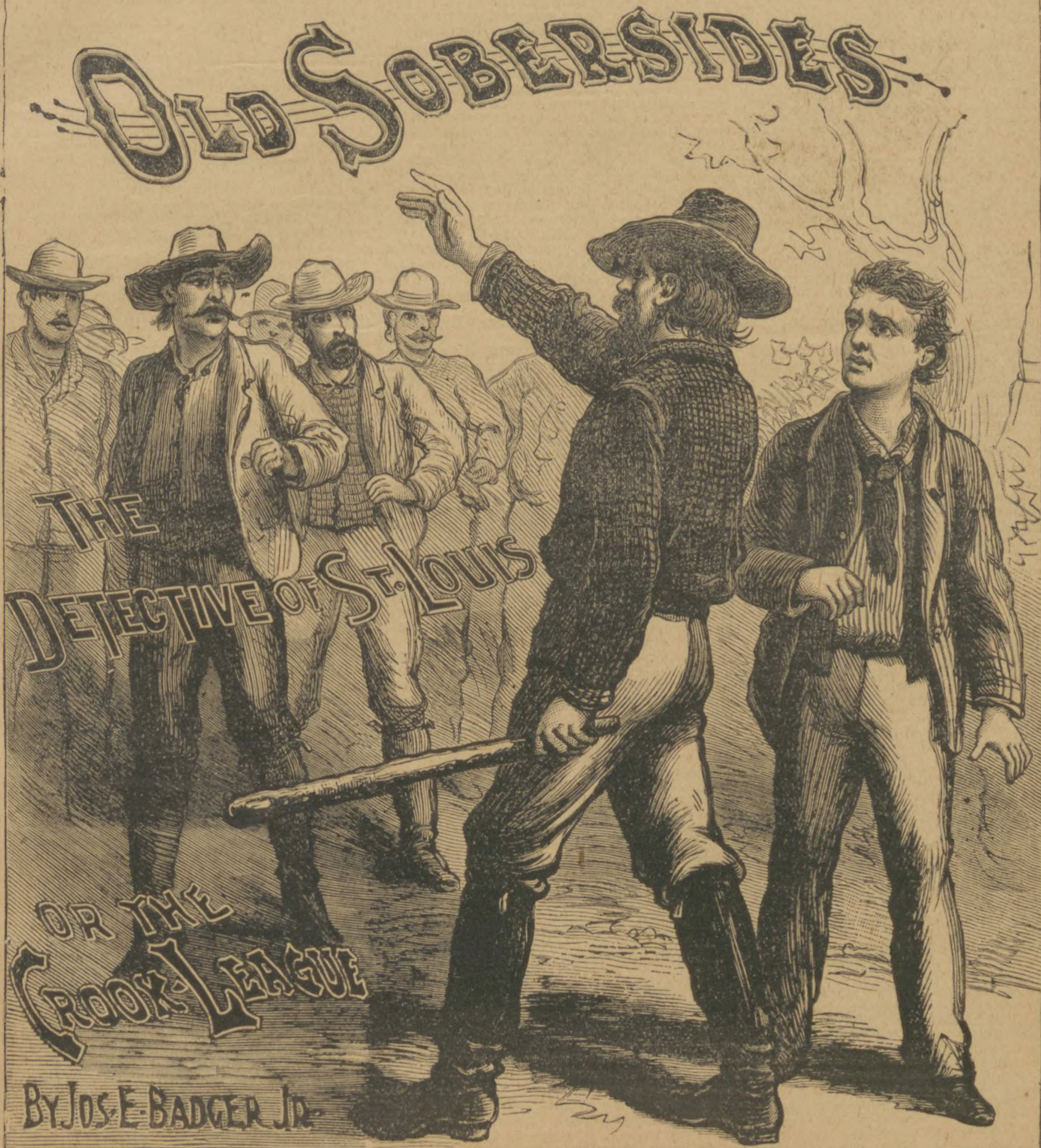
Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,

92 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. LXXII.



"FROM THE WAY OLD SOBERSIDES WENT DOWN, I RECKON HE'S PAST GIVING US ANY TROUBLE. BROTHERS, TO BUSINESS!"

Old Sobersides,

THE DETECTIVE OF ST. LOUIS;

OR,

THE CROOK-LEAGUE LAY-OUT.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "WHITE-HORSE WHEELER," "SILKY STEELE," "NOR' WEST NICK," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN INSULT RESENTED.

ROSS MONTGOMERY looked up quickly as his ears caught a familiar tone, and the slightest possible frown flitted across his darkly handsome face as he fully recognized the speaker: chief of three well-dressed gentlemen just entering the dining-room.

His glance that way was almost as brief as his frown, and then his eyes lowered to the supper which the white-aproned waiter had just placed before him.

"In drink, and ugly as sin!" flashed across his mind, with a half-regret that he had not gone without his supper entirely, rather than have this meeting take place. "Has he come on purpose for a row, or—"

Montgomery left that a blank. Although his eyes were downcast and his head slightly bowed over his plate, instinct told him what that abrupt cessation of speech meant, and slowly his cheeks colored under the steady gaze which he could feel, if he did not see.

For nearly half a minute that sudden silence lasted, and with a gleam leaping into his own eyes, the young man looked up, just as Austin Bainbridge turned toward one of his present companions, to utter:

"Another proof to back my argument, gentlemen! Even the good old Planter's House by which our fathers swore, is not wholly exempt, and inside of a year, faith, we'll take to writing our wedding cards with a tar-brush, I'm thinking!"

Mr. Bainbridge broke into a laugh, which was less heartily echoed by his mates, and as his strong hand noisily rattled a chair which stood at the table where Montgomery habitually sat at meals, that personage once more looked up, this time to squarely encounter those bold, insolent blue eyes.

"Good-evening, Mr. Bainbridge," he said, with a slight, yet polite bow; but neither salutation was returned, save by a cold stare which stung almost as keenly as though it had been a slap in the face.

Montgomery flushed hotly, but Bainbridge gave that just as little notice, his mustached lips curling scornfully as he turned his eyes toward his companions, drawlingly saying:

"What was I saying, friends? If only a few months have worked such a change, what may we not expect as the years roll by?"

"Sufficient unto the day, old boy," quickly spoke one of the others, giving a little nod toward Montgomery as he turned partly toward another table, adding: "This will suit me, and so—"

"All right, Kingston, if you prefer your own company to ours," said Bainbridge, dropping heavily into the chair which he had drawn from the table at which Montgomery was seated.

All three had been drinking rather more than was good for themselves, though not one could be called drunken. In drink, as out of it, Austin Bainbridge was a leader, and with a barely perceptible hesitation, Kingston and Napier yielded, taking seats at the same table.

From flushing so hotly, Ross Montgomery had turned pale, his face bent upon his plate, his hands trembling perceptibly as he manipulated knife and fork.

For many weeks past he had known a collision with Austin Bainbridge must surely come, sooner or later, and more times than one had he gone far out of his way to avoid a meeting.

Not because he was a physical craven: those who knew the stock best could tell you that never yet had a Montgomery worn the white feather; but because of one who called this man brother, and whom he, in turn, hoped one day, to call wife.

Although there were nearly a dozen other tables in that spacious apartment, the majority of them vacant as yet, Austin Bainbridge saw fit to take a seat at this particular one, an insult in his eyes if not upon his tongue.

For a single breath Montgomery was tempted to rise and beat a retreat, rather than have still worse come; but then his manhood revolted. Greatly as he must regret anything like an open quarrel with the half-brother to Adella Palmer, he could not openly brand himself coward.

Those insolent eyes had been upon him the instant their owner stepped inside the room, and they must have seen the waiter just placing his order before him. What excuse could he give for leaving his meal wholly untasted?

Coldly bowing in acknowledgment of the re-

cognition given him by Napier and Kingston, Ross Montgomery devoted himself to his food, trying his best to seem unconscious of the words which were passing over the lips of Bainbridge, as they awaited the coming of their food.

So many long years have gone by, that it is difficult for even one whose memory was ripe at that time, to recall what a sensation swept throughout our land when Abraham Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation; in those first weeks, even his best, closest friends felt that he had committed a fatal mistake.

What, then, must have been the sentiments of his enemies, open or secret?

At that date Missouri was a "loyal State," simply because she was not permitted to become aught else. The Federal forces were in full possession, and St. Louis was a military center; yet neither State nor city further south could outdo these in fierce, rabid denunciation of what was openly declared to be the crowning outrage of all.

Those bitter days have gone, never to return, but the story I have to relate obliges me to make this brief allusion to what was, in those times, a dangerous fact.

At all times a fluent speaker, Austin Bainbridge seemed to be in an unusually talkative mood this evening, and just reckless enough through drink to care little who might overhear his words.

They need not be recorded here: one-half the world is too young to understand them, and the other half would hardly give thanks for having the past too plainly recalled.

Enough that it was a savage denunciation of the man who was to become our Nation's Martyr, and, incidentally, of all those whom that act was designed to benefit.

Growing warmer as he talked, Bainbridge descended from glittering generalities to pointed personalities, and presently said:

"I tell you, gentlemen, 'twill prove to be the greatest curse of a thousand centuries! Even now—just think of it, will you? Even now you can't say with whom you are forced to rub elbows, and—here is Ross Montgomery, for instance," with an abrupt break in his flowing speech, his neatly-kept mustaches curling until they afforded a brief glimpse of his white teeth, contrasting with his full, red lips.

As he uttered that name, Bainbridge gave a sharp rap with his fork upon the table, and Montgomery almost involuntarily glanced up, to turn a bit paler as he encountered that insolent gaze.

"Were you speaking to me, Mr. Bainbridge?"

"Of, not to you, rather. Still, since you've responded, maybe you'll help illustrate the point I was trying to make, by answering a plain question. Will you?"

"What question, sir?"

"A question of fact. I was saying to my friends that nowadays one couldn't tell with certainty whether his next neighbor was a gentleman or a nigger, so long as he saw fit to ape gentility. Now, you—"

"Sir!"

"I'm coming to it, so don't get in a rush, my boy. I started to say that you bear a good name—few better—and cut quite a dash when you see fit to put on scallops, but—is it true, what I've heard tell, that there's more than one drop of tar in your veins?"

There was greater insolence in manner and look than in words, although none who heard could for an instant misinterpret the foul insult conveyed by that question.

Ross Montgomery flushed crimson, his eyes fairly blazing with fire. Had any other man spoken those words, his answer would have come sharp and sure. But—he was *her* relative!

"Whoever told you that, lied in his throat, Austin Bainbridge," the younger man said, huskily. "And he who dares repeat the foul rumor is equally base."

Bainbridge leaned back in his chair, a cold and cruel smile playing about his lips, paying no heed to the feebly-muttered protest of his half-drunken friends, nor to the interested glances which other diners were turning that way at sound of his full, deep tones.

"Then it isn't true, my boy?"

"You know it is not—none better, sir!"

"How should I, man? I never was honored with the acquaintance of your family. I merely know what I have heard: that the tar brush was surely at work, and that you fled from South Carolina to avoid being sold to the rice-fields."

Ross Montgomery turned pale as though a corpse. He could no longer doubt the exact reason why Austin Bainbridge had chosen that particular table from the many, or what the end of that talk must be.

"You will give me your authority for this report, Bainbridge?" he spoke, with difficulty calming his voice.

"I might give a dozen of them, faith, but whether they would thank me for bringing gentlemen into the mix, is quite another thing."

"Do you dare—"

Again did Napier and Kingston attempt to change the current, which was becoming dan-

gerous as it was unpleasant to all save that self-willed man; but their influence was small at any time, and of not the least avail just now.

"Who's quarreling? Bless your soul, dear fellow, since black and yellow has been declared white by our doubly revered rail-splitter, I've taken solemn oath never to enter into quarrel with aught who fears to carry his pedigree blazoned upon his front. Now, Montgomery, here, is—"

"Far from seeking a quarrel with you, Mr. Bainbridge, but even *you* may let a careless tongue carry you out of bounds."

"From other lips I might regard that as a threat, but from yours, a mere impertinence," said Bainbridge, growing cooler as his intended victim waxed warm. "As I stated, a man must show a clean pedigree in these days, before I'll quarrel with him. And you—can you do so much, Ross Montgomery?"

"Oh, come, Austin," interposed Napier, with a touch of anger in his voice. "You're running this joke into the ground. Montgomery is as white as either of us, and a mighty sight more sensible, or he'd have shaken our company long ago."

Bainbridge was too willing to improve the opening offered by this blundering speech, to taint of correcting it.

"By taking to his heels, you mean? Well, 'twouldn't be the first time Montgomery ran away from white gentlemen, according to reports."

"Those reports are false, Austin Bainbridge, and the one who repeats such vile rumors is a liar, beyond excuse!"

"I repeat what is common property on the street. If that stings you, why not *prove* reports false? You brand them as lies, but where is your proof? You deny being touched with the tar-brush, and—"

"Take care, sir!"

"Just what I'm trying to do. If a man is trying to palm off black for white, all true men ought to expose him, and if the fraud is a plausible one, on the face of it, all the more reason for showing it up."

"Kinks can be straightened out, I'm told, and finger-nails so tinted as to defy detection, but there is *one* point which defies alteration or disguise. Is the cartilage of your nose-tip divided, boy?"

As he asked this question, Austin Bainbridge leaned across the table toward the end at which Montgomery was seated, adding quickly:

"Why not settle all doubts right here and right now? If the cartilage is divided, you are pure white, but if not—"

He shot forth a hand as though to apply that test, but really with the purpose of wringing Montgomery's nose between thumb and forefinger.

But before the insult could take full effect, a tight-clinched fist struck him squarely between the eyes, knocking him backward to the floor, chair and all.

CHAPTER II.

HUNTING HUMAN GAME.

THE smothered resentment of many months went with that blow, and powerful man though he was, Austin Bainbridge never knew when he struck the floor, head and shoulders first.

His companions sprung to their feet with little cries, half-angry, half-disgusted, but Ross Montgomery was even quicker than they, and his voice rung out sharply:

"He brought it upon himself, I call you all to witness, gentlemen. Had any other person dared say half as much, I'd have shot him like a dog! Now—Mr. Bainbridge knows where to find me, should he care to press this ugly affair further."

A cold bow toward Napier and Kingston pointed these words, and then Ross Montgomery turned to leave the room, paying no attention to the various comments which arose: for the most part complimentary to himself and his recent action.

The loud, insolent tones of Austin Bainbridge had attracted the attention of other diners present, and the sympathy of the majority was clearly with the insulted rather than with his insulter.

"Keep back, gentlemen, if you please," commanded Kingston, as the two men knelt beside their friend.

He lay like one deprived of life, save for a faint shivering in his muscular limbs. Blood was trickling from his nostrils and tinging his white teeth. Had a bullet pierced his brain, Austin Bainbridge could hardly have been more completely "knocked out."

Yet he quickly rallied under the ministrations of his friends, both of whom proved themselves far more ready to act than to talk, and pushing aside the glass Napier was holding to his lips, Bainbridge staggered to his feet, one hand instinctively slipping beneath his coat as he glanced around that large apartment.

"He's gone, Austin," said Kingston, rightly interpreting that look.

"Ran away, has he? Well," with a short, forced laugh, "'tisn't the first time, according to all accounts."

"Don't try to talk, man, but come away where—"

Bainbridge rudely shook off the hand that would have led him away. Outwardly he seemed marvelously composed for a man who had so recently been knocked senseless, but through his fiercely glittering eyes could be caught a hint of his actual condition.

He pressed a kerchief to his face, then gave a little laugh as he held the cambric forth, stained with scarlet.

"There's the color of my blood, gentlemen, and I'm not ashamed to show it, although this is the first time human hand brought it further than the surface."

"He struck you, off guard, Austin," said Napier, soothingly.

"That goes without saying, stupid. With all his cursed insolence, the nigger would never dare strike eyes that were looking at him."

"Those are hard words, Mr. Bainbridge," gravely ventured one of the guests. "Of course you are prepared to back them up?"

"Are you his champion, sir?"

"Certainly not, sir. But I caught some of your expressions, and you actually hinted that Montgomery was of mixed blood."

"I'll do more than hint, sir. I say here, what I'll proclaim at every street-corner: Ross Montgomery, as he calls himself now, is nothing more or less than a runaway slave from one of the Carolinas. He has no earthly or legal right to the proud name he bears. The tar is thick in his veins, but I'll make it run—as its owner has fled! I will brand the dog so plainly that all may read at sight."

Without waiting for reply or possible argument, Bainbridge took an arm of each of his mates, then left the room, his bearing as proud and erect as though he had not been laid low in the dust by the strong hand of one whom he had so shamefully insulted.

Leaving the hotel, Bainbridge repaired to his own chambers, where he devoted an hour or so to changing his soiled apparel and obliterating as much as might be the marks of that iron fist.

Thanks to his good constitution and the natural purity of his blood, as yet little affected by the wild life he was leading, that blow, heavy as it had been, produced but slight disfigurement, and a deft touch of cosmetic paint masked the faint discoloration as yet visible below his eyes.

While thus occupied, Bainbridge laughed, jested, chatted briskly with his friends, never in his life seeming more wholly at ease. But they were not entirely deceived, and when he proposed a stroll about town, uneasy glances were interchanged.

"If you're afraid, lads, give me the shake."

"Not afraid, but— Oh, come, Aus! You're surely not going to follow this thing up?"

"If by 'thing' you mean Ross Montgomery, I surely am going to follow it up, Kingston. Granted that I'm half-drunk, I'm still a gentleman, born and bred. Would you have it spread over town that I let a mongrel cur blacken my eyes, yet go free to make his brags over the exploit?"

"You drove him to it, don't you know?"

"I'll drive him further, or the whole world shall know the reason why," coldly retorted Bainbridge, drawing on a fresh pair of gloves and picking up his gold-headed cane. "Come or not, as you deem best."

Neither of the young men seemed satisfied, yet they had long since grown accustomed to yielding to that stronger will, and this was not to prove the exception. They bore Bainbridge company as he left his rooms, and together they began the rounds of the more noted saloons and sporting places for which the Mound City has always been celebrated.

In his own way, Austin Bainbridge was a rather noted character in sporting circles, thanks to the wealth which had fallen to his share, and to his bold, almost reckless nature.

As yet he had done nothing to seriously stain his record, from a worldly point of view, although the pulpit would hardly have held him up as a model deserving imitation.

He drank freely, and more than usual on this evening. He was a bold gamester whenever the mood took him, and he never knew when he was beaten. Always free with his money, many a charitable action might have been traced back to his door, there to be met by jest or scoff. In fine, he was a man of the world, worldly.

Where such a man is concerned, it is marvelous how swiftly news will spread, and though the night was still young, Bainbridge met many an acquaintance whose words or thinly-veiled curiosity proved how certainly that knock-down blow had been heard of.

He showed no annoyance at this, however, and on more than one occasion was himself the first to speak of the mark upon his handsome face.

"It's the mark of a mongrel, gentlemen," he said, at one of the resorts where he vainly looked for Ross Montgomery. "I'll wipe it out before dawn, unless the cur has crawled into his kennel for good."

He spoke coolly enough, but in those slightly bloodshot eyes was an expression ill to see, and

more than one morbid fellow quietly dogged Bainbridge's footsteps, hoping to be on hand when the "circus" began.

At length fate rewarded this hunter of human game, and a cruel smile curled his red lips as he caught sight of Ross Montgomery, standing near the bar, at one of the higher-class saloons.

"No, rash work, Austin, I beg," huskily protested Kingston, as his leader crossed the threshold. "Think of your sister, man!"

"It's of her I am thinking, sir," was the icy retort.

Bainbridge strode swiftly across the room, and warned by instinct, Ross Montgomery turned just in time to catch a glimpse of that pale, stern face, the owner of which was lifting his supple cane to strike.

"I've caught you at last, you black cur!"

"Don't— Ha!"

Montgomery flung up an arm to guard his head as the cane whished through the air. A sharp cry parted his lips as the blow fell, but it was born of fierce rage rather than of fear or of pain.

While one arm flung off the cane, his other aimed a savage blow at that handsome face, but Bainbridge was on his guard, now, and a deft jerk of his head to one side permitted the fist to pass over his shoulder without making connection.

"This for your black blood, mongrel!" he roared, striking thrice in swift succession with his cane, and so strongly as to defy parrying. "How do you like your emancipation, Sambo?"

Mad with rage and shame at this public humiliation, Montgomery closed with his more powerful adversary, caring nothing for his own injuries, thirsting only for revenge.

And flinging aside his cane, content with having applied the brand he had pledged, Bainbridge met that fierce assault with right hearty glee.

A brief wrestle, then he flung Montgomery away, having broken his hold, thanks to his superior strength. And instantly springing forward, he struck swiftly and hardly, crying as he came:

"Stand up to the rack, Sambo! You chose the weapons, so don't complain if you get rather more than you can stomach—so!"

A strong blow went home, sending the slighter-built man reeling back, blinded, half-stunned, saved from measuring his length only by coming in contact with the bar.

An inarticulate cry broke from his bleeding lips, and hardly conscious of his actions, Ross Montgomery felt for the pistol which, in common with most men of those troubled days, he habitually carried.

Warning cries were uttered, but before a shot could be fired, strong hands grappled with the desperate young man, and he was hustled unceremoniously out of the saloon, Austin Bainbridge laughing scornfully at his utter discomfiture the while.

"You devil!" came from his bleeding lips as Montgomery was forced across the threshold. "Look to yourself, Austin Bainbridge! I'll play even for this, or lose my own life trying, you devil!"

The door was closed behind him, and one of the proprietors stood guard beside it, to hinder a return on Montgomery's part, but Bainbridge showed no alarm, and very little excitement, now he had given even more than he had received.

One of the spectators, a man of something over the average height, rather powerfully built, wearing the undress uniform of a Federal officer, drew nearer Bainbridge, speaking in deep, grave tones:

"You've had the best of it, so far, Bainbridge, but better keep on guard, or that fellow will turn the tables, yet."

"Good-evening, major," grasping the officer's hand with his own, from which he had just removed the split and blood-stained glove. "You were saying?"

"That I saw the Old Boy in yonder fellow's eyes, even if you didn't. He'll play even, just as he swore, unless you keep on guard."

"He may try, but trying and doing are two very different things, Major Mordaunt. I believe I've proved so much, if not altogether to his satisfaction."

"Yes, if he'd come at you openly and above-board, but—will he?"

"Hardly, unless Father Abraham issues another proclamation, making his brothers men in deed as in name. But, fair or foul, I'm ready for the mongrel whelp, and I reckon he's fairly convinced of so much, by this time."

"Of course it's you for it, Mr. Bainbridge," with a stiff bow. "But if ever I tan looked out of mortal eyes, he did from those eyes this night! Look out, I repeat, for he'll try to play even, though he has to come at your back with bullet or steel!"

"Well, he's welcome to try it on. I've used a cane to-night, I'll use an overseer's whip the next time. He's better accustomed to the touch of the last than the first, too, I'll go bail."

Those words could not be mistaken by men who lived in a slave State, and many were the questions poured upon Bainbridge, who appeared only too willing to answer them in full, his tongue running all the more freely since it was

kept constantly moist with wine or still stronger drink.

He gave no actual facts, though these were more than once asked by some of those present whose sympathies appeared to be rather with the vanquished than the victor, but he made his assertions broad enough to create a strong prejudice against his absent adversary.

"I tell you the stain of the tar-brush is there, try to rub it out as he may. I'm not down on him so much on that score, however as for his infernal impudence in lifting his smoky eyes to a lady, who is—"

Bainbridge broke off abruptly, but the allusion was understood.

That lady was Adella Palmer, his half-sister.

CHAPTER III.

OLD SOBERSIDES, THE DETECTIVE.

LIKE every other populous city, St. Louis possessed a moral pest-hole, where one's personal safety might be pretty accurately gauged by one's honesty, or rather one's utter lack of that quality.

What New York's Five Points was during its worst days, so "The Patch" was to the Mound City during the years covered by the Civil War; and bold was he indeed who passed within its limits without the open sesame of the criminal class.

If an arrest was to be made in that quarter, it was rarely undertaken without a regular muster of the police force, and many a stout-hearted officer's face turned pale as he received the word; for who could say how or in what order those detailed would show up at next roll-call?

And yet, on the same evening which witnessed the unfortunate fracas between Austin Bainbridge and Ross Montgomery, a single man was easily making his way toward The Patch, his precise destination being a saloon which even the Patchonians deemed a dangerous resort.

This particular person, too, was known by sight or by reputation to every criminal in the city, and many of their most daring members had "wilted" under the sturdy grip of Solomon Sober, to eventually be "sent up the road, to Jefferson."

Mr. Sober was taking matters very easily, when he first comes under our notice, moving slowly, his broad shoulders rounded, his head bent forward, his hands lightly locked behind his back.

Reaching a street-corner, he paused, drawing a silver watch from his fob by a leather string, consulting its open face by the rays of the gas-lamp, which at the same time lighted up his strong, homely countenance and his almost Quaker-like garb.

His closely-buttoned coat was long in the skirts, of coarse material, plain and strongly made. His trousers apparently came from the same bolt of cloth, and bore that same peculiar air; home-cut and hand-sewed, probably by a country tailoress.

His tall hat alone marked him as a citizen, but even that savored of rusticity to a certain degree.

As the gas-light fell squarely across his face, it revealed the broad, strong jaws, the large yet firm mouth, the slightly heavy nose and projecting brows; a combination of features which could hardly be termed handsome, and surely never called weak.

With his face shaven clean except for a short, thick fringe of whiskers which met below his chin; with his sober garb, his stiff black stock, his measured movements, Solomon Sober might very well pass for a country parson on his first visit to the metropolis.

In place of that, he was one of the most successful detectives St. Louis ever knew.

"Time enough!" Sober muttered, barely above his breath, after a keen glance at the face of his watch. "Dolly has hardly got the cobwebs washed out of his eyes, as yet, and his owls haven't fairly left their day-perch."

Solomon Sober passed on, stepping more lightly himself as his keen ears caught the sound of footfalls in advance; then he made a motion which would in itself acquit him of being a minister of the Gospel.

One hand slipped through a bottomless pocket at his side, his fingers closing around the polished butt of a revolver.

That was the only sign he made, never altering his pace in the slightest, and barely turning a glance toward the two men whom he met, close to the alley-mouth, midway the block.

They were arm-in-arm seemingly on the best of terms, although one was doing all of the talking, and in tones which plainly hinted at long and heavy drinking.

Austin Bainbridge and Major Adelbert Mordaunt.

Solomon Sober recognized the first man, with whom he was fairly well acquainted, as will be explained later on. But as Bainbridge did not seem to recognize him, the detective passed by without word or sign, never once turning his head for a backward glance, even though instinct warned him one or both of those men were favoring him with a look.

"On another tear, looks like!" soliloquized Sober, his heavy brows gathering. "Will he

go like his father, or— Who was that sport in his company, I wonder?"

He had never, to his knowledge, laid eyes upon the person before, but now Major Mordaunt had been photographed by a brain which never forgot.

Sober quickened his pace a little, changing his course for one more directly toward The Patch, forgetting both Bainbridge and Mordaunt in thought of what might lie before him ere his present mission was fairly brought to an ending.

A grim smile came to his strong mouth as he remembered how gravely the chief of police warned him against venturing into that moral sink-hole alone: it was a compliment which he was well fitted to both enjoy and appreciate.

Not another man connected with the force, either regular or detective, would dare venture within those well-defined limits after the first shadows of night had fallen, without having a strong, thoroughly-armed escort to back up his demands.

Why was it? Solomon Sober himself could hardly have told, but the simple fact remained: he would not only enter The Patch after night, alone, but would search its vilest dens if necessary, and even arrest his man, depending on moral force rather than physical. Yet he had an abundance of the last-named quality, too, and knew right well how to bring it into play when the necessity arose, as The Patch could testify.

It was this utter absence of fear on a point which even undeniably brave men were quite ready to admit, which won reputation for Solomon Sober, even more than his many successful struggles with criminals, both open and secret.

As he often declared, he was far too old-fashioned for fancy touches, preferring to work by "main force and awkwardness." And this, added to his peculiar style of dress, gave him one title which many old St. Louisians will readily recognize: "The Old-Style Detective."

Meanwhile, Solomon Sober has been making his way with quickened steps toward his present destination: the saloon run by "Dolly" Varden, in The Patch.

He made no attempt to disguise his approach or his personality, although no man knew better than himself, how gladly almost any one of those scowling, skulking creatures of the night would welcome a chance to take his life—if only they dared!

To one and another the Old-Style Detective gave a word in passing, although he received precious few himself. Those criminals—for innocent people were very rare within those limits—slunk away, too glad to find that some other person was the one "wanted."

Varden's place was almost brilliantly lighted up, with doors swung wide and entrance unobstructed. Varden himself stood back of the bar, his bare arms leaning on the counter, his jewels and jewelry glittering and sparkling under the chandelier: for Varden was the king of The Patch, and Varden's the pride of that select locality.

Solomon Sober paused upon the threshold, quietly glancing over the dozen or more men within the place, then nodding coolly toward the burly proprietor, whose shaggy brows were almost meeting in a scowl as he recognized the detective.

That recognition was instant throughout the saloon, and every voice grew still as evil eyes turned upon the bold man who so coolly took life in his hand, while venturing across the deadline so painfully well known to the police force.

"Good-evening, Dolly!" saluted Sober, with a bow which included all present. "Was passing by and thought I might as well drop in."

"We know right well what your sort of 'dropping' means, Mr. Sober," sullenly replied the proprietor, rising and slowly unrolling his rumpled shirt-sleeves. "When you drop in, a good lad or two is mighty apt to drop out!"

"Blame the good lads who can't keep to the straight path, Varden, not me," retorted the detective, moving toward the bar, both hands in his coat-pockets the while. "But I'm not after you, so don't mar the general get-up by keeping that black scowl upon your elegant phiz. You're a regular flower-garden-to-night, Dolly."

Varden suffered his features to relax with something akin to a smile. He was rather proud of his glory, to tell the truth, and by no means averse to flattery, however fulsome.

"Well, a gent needn't live like a dog simply because he's been given a dog's reputation," turning his beaming hand so that the light brought sparkles from his diamonds. "Neat, clean, and tasty; that's my motto, you understand?"

"It calls for strong eyes to look squarely at you though, Dolly," observed the detective smilingly, at the same time glancing comprehensively over that really gorgeous figure.

Not alone in gold and gems was Varden resplendent, but his dress was almost ludicrously rich, both in color and in material.

His linen was of the finest, but thickly sprinkled with brightly-colored figures. His waistcoat was of satin, richly embroidered with strongly contrasting colors. His trousers were of the largest plaid, a mingling of red, blue,

orange, green and black. His cravat was of scarlet silk, clasped by a broad band of gold in which three large diamonds were set.

Upon his broad bosom rested a diamond cross, fastened with chain and pin. Studs flashed with his every movement, and a massive gold chain was doubled about his thick neck, falling to his waist in clinking loops.

All this Solomon Sober took in at a single glance; then, leaning carelessly against the bar, he fixed his gaze upon a rather slender man of middle age among the sullen group, quietly speaking:

"The chief wants you, Billy, and I told him I'd pass the word."

"What for? I haven't done a stroke of work since—you know."

"Maybe so, Billy. I didn't ask, and he didn't say. There's no particular rush, I fancy, and if you'll agree to drop in on the chief, say in the morning, I'll let it go at that. If not—well, I reckon I'll have to ask for your company, now."

Almost lightly Sober spoke; but, though there was a grave smile upon his lips, there was a business-like fire in his eyes which warned "Billy the Banker" not to risk too much.

Not another man in all St. Louis could or would have run that risk, but the Old-Style Detective knew his men, even as they knew him.

There was a brief silence, during which no one moved, and Old Sobersides knew that his next breath might come in a fierce fight for dear life. But nothing in his face betrayed this knowledge, and his tones were even as ever when he spoke again:

"It's your put, Billy. Will you give the chief a call, or must I give you the collar?"

"Will the morning do, Mr. Sober?"

"Yes, if you're sure you'll not forget the appointment."

"All right. I'll call. I haven't done anything to be ashamed of, since I paid penalty."

"Then you haven't anything to be afraid of, of course. Morning goes. I'll tell the chief he may expect you. Now, Dolly, one drink around, and I'll play wet blanket no longer."

Apparently without a thought of danger, the detective waited while the thugs and toughs ranged themselves along the bar, and gravely touching his lips to the glass, though none of the poison passed his teeth, Old Sobersides said:

"Good luck, gentlemen! May we never have a less friendly meeting than this. Never mind the change, Dolly: I've taken more shingles off your roof than I can ever afford to replace; but merely in the way of business, you understand, my dear fellow."

Without waiting for a reply, but without betraying anything that could lend the impression of fear on his part, Old Sobersides turned away from the bar and left the saloon.

He pressed quickly along through the night, taking a different course from the one by which he had entered that truly dangerous locality, keeping a keen watch on all sides, each hand grasping the butt of a loaded revolver.

He hardly anticipated an attack from any one who knew or could recognize him, but all aliens were deemed legitimate prey in The Patch once the shades of night had fallen, and should such an assault be made, after recognition would hardly save his life.

Courageous as he undeniably was, Old Sobersides drew a long, full breath as he passed the "dead-line," a faint thrill of pride running through his veins as he reflected how few men in his line of life would have run that same risk, or, running it, have come off so easily.

His present course led him not many squares from the river-front, always more or less dangerous after nightfall, and his senses were on the keen alert, even after The Patch had been left far behind him.

The streets seemed wholly deserted, though the street-lamps were burning brightly, and he met never a mortal for quite a time.

Then, turning a corner, he stopped short, with a faint ejaculation.

Directly before him lay the figure of a man, flat upon his back, with that indescribable something which so surely indicates death in a violent form!

Only for a single instant did Old Sobersides hesitate: barely long enough to flash a keen glance up and down the deserted street; but as he failed to observe any person in either direction, he sprang swiftly forward, bending over that silent shape.

Even before he could fairly see that upturned face, the detective took note of the blood which marked the stone flags near that hatless head, and then—

"Austin Bainbridge!"

The recognition was instant. It was indeed Austin Bainbridge, lying there so grim and ghastly. Austin Bainbridge, a corpse, with blood and brains oozing from a shattered skull!

CHAPTER IV.

UNDER THE LAMPLIGHT.

"Poor fellow! Murdered—done to death like a dog!"

Solomon Sober dropped the body he had instinctively caught up in one of his own as he

bent over that silent form, an expression of pain coming into his strong, homely countenance.

Something of the past flashed across his mind, but only for an instant did this weakness last. Then he was once more the detective, ready to avenge as he would have been to save, had that chance been offered instead.

Instinct rather than eyesight had guided him in forming this opinion, but now, as he quickly yet carefully examined the body, he found his first impression had been correct: beyond a doubt Austin Bainbridge had been murdered, and that by means of a gun or pistol. His skull was terribly shattered, and even yet the scent of scorched hair could be detected.

His hat and cane lay close by, just as they had fallen with their owner, but before he could do or see more, Sober drew erect and back with a start, flashing a look up the street, from which direction came the ringing rap of a policeman's locust, then the far-reaching trill of his ivory whistle.

The next sound was that of heavy footfalls, and, darting across the street, Old Sobersides paused in a deep doorway where the darkness offered him more than fair hiding.

He had not long to wait. Two burly policemen came running up, accompanied by several other figures, two at least of which the waiting detective recognized, not without a professional thrill of wondering curiosity.

"Nipper Noll and Nosey Clark!" he said to himself. "Surely they haven't done this? It's a step over their heads, unless—wait!"

"Don't that look sort o' like it, boss? Ugh!" exclaimed Nipper Noll, shivering as though stricken with a sudden chill, his naturally pasty-hued visage looking more than ordinarily pale under the lamplight.

"Keep an eye on 'em both, Jordan," gruffly spoke one of the officers, as he knelt beside the body, scanning it closely, yet refraining from touching it, even with a fingertip.

"You bet I will, just! Don't disturb it, Pulteney, until the coroner can get here."

"Teach your granny, mate," retorted the officer, drawing back, but without rising from his knees. "He was a high-roller, from his looks, but I can't exactly place him."

"It's Austin Bainbridge, officer," volunteered Nosey Clark: his tremendous proboscis plainly indicating why he was so called. "We saw him when—"

Nipper Noll gave his mate a covert thrust in the ribs with a sharp elbow, then he took up the thread himself.

"It just happened so, you want to know, Mr. Pulteney, but Nosey an' me saw pretty nigh the whole of it when—"

"Just lifted his roof, boss!"

By this time, confident that he might do so without attracting particular attention, now that nearly a dozen other persons had been drawn to the spot by that curious instinct which we all have noticed, but which none of us can rightly explain, Old Sobersides left his place of concealment, crossing the street quietly, pausing where his face was cast into the shadow.

His keen eyes were flitting from face to face of the two men whom he knew as "crooks," but whom he would never have picked out as men capable of committing a crime so boldly outrageous as this killing.

They were both plainly excited, but showed far more nerve than he was willing to credit them with, supposing they were the guilty ones.

Each fellow seemed eager to tell all he knew, yet approached the subject in jerks and dashes, breaking off abruptly, only to have the thread caught up by the other.

The kneeling policeman glanced from face to face as its owner spoke, but then he grew impatient, and demanded, sternly:

"Out with it, can't you, Nipper? You saw—just what, and just whom?"

But Nipper Noll shrunk back, his naturally swarthy face blanching to a sickly white as he stared at the profile of Solomon Sober, who had just turned to glance up the street, from whence came the sounds of fresh footfalls.

The detective turned in time to catch that scared look, and without a moment's hesitation stepped forward, giving the policeman a curt nod, then speaking to the startled crook:

"You say you witnessed the—this killing, Oliver Pickett?"

"So did Nosey, sir. We was just—before Heaven, sir, we never put a finger in the pie!"

"Hardly, since you are here, free men," quietly said Sober.

Then, turning toward the policeman who was standing on guard, locust drawn:

"Have you sent in a call, Jordan?"

"Yes, sir," touching his helmet with the tip of his club. "In such a case as this—Pickett swore it was a sure job—we didn't care to come with a rush. And so—we sent word to Headquarters, and a man to fetch up the coroner."

The second officer had risen to his feet by this time, and now recognizing the detective, much as his mate had done, spoke in a slightly stiff manner:

"We're in charge, Mr. Sober, at least until the chief or the coroner takes our place."

"Of course," with a grave bow. "I merely happened this way, and am but a spectator. Only, if I might advise, I wouldn't let Nipper or Clark mention names—just yet."

The last sentence came in a guarded whisper, but its full meaning was quickly caught by the officer.

Like nearly all who are on the regular force, he was jealous of that more privileged class, the detectives; but, too, he was sensible enough to take a wise hint when proffered, and, turning upon the two crooks, he spoke sternly:

"You can tell us just what you saw, without mentioning names, my pretty fellows. And mind you, talk along a straight string, or it may be all the worse for you in the end."

Nosey Clark drew back a bit, seemingly frightened by this stern hint, but Nipper Noll, either bolder or more impudent than his pal, was quicker to speak.

"You see, sir, the gent was pretty full, from his looks, and we was just shadowing him, on an off-chance, you understand?"

"To go through him, you mean?"

Nipper Noll gave a nod and a sickly grin of assent.

"But we didn't have time nor a fair chance, sir, and so—"

"Go on; what did you see?"

"A man jump out at him, fierce-like, and then—well, when the flash came we just hoofed it, fast as the law allows, sir."

"Would you know the man who fired that shot if you were brought face to face with him, Pickett?"

"Among a thousand, sir! Wouldn't you, Nosey?"

"Sure I would, then! 'I'll never quit seeing him—in my sleep, worse luck!' answered Clark, with a half-smothered groan.

"Me too!" declared Nipper Noll, too jealous to permit his pal to monopolize that enviable sentiment. "I'll never forget it all, if I live to be a full century!"

"Pity about you, isn't it?" sneered the officer, who evidently held but a poor opinion of both these gentlemen. "You couldn't feel much worse if you'd done the killing yourselves, could you?"

"We didn't—you surely can't think it, sir!" protested Nipper Noll, now in strong earnest, for such ugly suspicions might easily prove worse than uncomfortable.

Before more could be said, the measured trot of a horse's hoofs came through the night air, rapidly approaching that spot, and with a hasty whisper to the officer to hold the two witnesses in check for the present, Solomon Sober passed through the increasing throng to give vent to a slight ejaculation as he recognized the officer who just then came upon the scene.

The new-comer wore the undress uniform of a captain of cavalry, although his face and figure were that of a still youthful man; but such a combination was common enough during the last years of the Civil War.

From his position in the saddle the captain could catch a fair view of that motionless shape, over which the lamplight fell clearly. One look, then a sharp, startled cry escaped his lips, telling plainly of recognition, even without the words:

"Austin Bainbridge! Lying like—What's all this mean?"

Solomon Sober stepped quickly forward, one hand closing upon the bridle-reins and his other checking the officer as he started to leap from saddle to ground.

"Captain Thornton—"

"You, is it, Mr. Sober? What—who did it, man?"

"That's for time to tell," gravely answered the detective, leading the horse toward the other pavement. "It's Bainbridge, poor fellow, and dead enough—worse luck! But there's another: poor girl!"

"Adella—Miss Palmer?"

"Yes. She don't know of it as yet, of course. Somebody has got to carry the news. Somebody who can soften the blow by sharing her grief, poor child. Who shall do it, Thornton?"

The officer shrunk away, with a slight gesture of aversion. How could he, loving the girl so passionately? How could he carry such sad tidings to crush a true, loving heart?

"Because you can feel for her, in grief as in joy, Frank," said the detective, a quaver in his own voice as he spoke softly. "Think what a terrible shock it must prove, soften it as we may! Think how—I'd not ask it, Thornton, but my duty is here, and I can't leave that duty to another. Can't you see, dear boy?"

"I see, but—there is no hope, then?"

"Not for Austin, in this world. And I wish I could think there was much more in the other, poor lad! But, you'll go to her, Frank?"

"Yes, since I must. What shall I tell her?"

"The whole truth. That will be best. Yonder's a reporter, and the morning papers will be full of it all. Better from your lips, than from others less kindly. But, soften it as much as you can, Frank."

"She'll hate me, ever after, but—it's duty!" muttered the captain, shaking the reins free, then dashing rapidly away.

Old Sobersides watched him until out of

sight in the night, then turned back to where the crowd, still increasing, surrounded the corpse.

Just as he did so, a buggy drove rapidly up, containing a policeman, and another man in citizen's garb, in the latter of whom the detective recognized the coroner for the city. And before that official could force a passage through the crowd, Sober gained his side.

CHAPTER V. A DIFFICULT DUTY.

FOR several minutes Captain Frank Thornton rode rapidly through the nearly deserted streets, taking the nearest route for the Carondelet Road, near which thoroughfare the Palmer residence was located.

His brain was all in a whirl, and for the time being seemed wholly incapable of connected thought or aught else like reasoning.

That ghastly pale face came back to his memory, and close beside it another, young, smiling, full of life and love. A cold chill and a warm flush seemed to meet and mingle, and the mixture was painful enough to wring a groan from his mustached lips.

How cold, how agonized, how full of hopeless misery that ghastly white face had looked, under the lamplight!

It seemed more than mere death. He had been so wild, so reckless, so—so evil, people had whispered!

Captain Thornton gave himself a shake, almost savage, at that involuntary thought, and from that instant on, he was more nearly master of himself and his shocked brain.

If he gave more thought to what was ahead, rather than to what lay behind him, who shall give him blame?

Austin Bainbridge had never treated him as a friend, and if they had never come to actual blows, the fault lay almost wholly with the captain of volunteers; he certainly had been given ample excuse for quarreling.

On the other hand, she to whom Old Sobersides had asked him to break the news, was one well fitted to love and be loved, at whose feet Frank Thornton had long since laid his heart, and he would have been a far happier man this night had that tribute been accepted.

And she? Alone in the world! Without a single blood relative among all those millions, so far as the young officer's knowledge went.

Something like a thrill of hope ran through his veins at that thought. Surely Adella would appreciate such love as his, in this dark hour? Or would she—Something that fell little short of a curse parted his lips, and Thornton gave his willing steed a savage rake with both spurs.

With a protesting snort, the jaded animal broke from trot to gallop, still headed for the Carondelet Road, its rider vainly striving to hit upon the safest, easiest method of breaking the sad tidings to the young woman he loved so passionately.

It was a difficult task, in more than one sense of the word, and as the statement must be made sooner or later, a few words may as well be slipped in here, as later on.

Austin Bainbridge and Adella Palmer were related by marriage. They called each other brother and sister, and were called half-brother and half-sister by others, although neither had the same father or mother.

Harold Bainbridge was a widower with one son, Austin, when he married Amelia Winston. He was wild, reckless, passionate, though a worse enemy to himself than to any other living being. She was gentle, timid, born to be a martyr, her closest friends were wont to say.

Within two years of their marriage, Mrs. Bainbridge was left a widow, Harold meeting death in a drunken affray over cards, on board one of the Mississippi river steamboats.

The rich young widow mourned sincerely enough, yet the year had hardly been rounded, when she again became a bride, this time to Mason Palmer, afterward the father of Adella, their only child.

Once again the little woman became a widow, but her remaining years were spent with her child, and her grief for her second husband was long as it surely was sincere.

Bainbridge had left little property behind him, but Palmer had been very rich, both in real and personal estate. His will left Mrs. Palmer in sole charge, but she had private wishes of his which were faithfully carried out when her time came for leaving this life.

The property, cash and real estate, was left equally to her daughter Adella, and Austin Bainbridge, the son of her first husband. Her home had been his, ever since that ill-starred wedding, and dying, she begged him to live with, care for, and love Adella as his sister still.

Possibly Austin Bainbridge kept his pledge to the best of his ability, but it could hardly be said his guardianship was wholly agreeable to Adella Palmer, though only an occasional protest, and nothing like an actual quarrel had ever come between them.

In one respect Austin seemed unnecessarily stern, to Adella. True, as joint-heir with himself to the Palmer property, she was very rich, and hence might be deemed a natural prey for

fortune-hunters, but was that a fair excuse for Austin's actually insulting her friend?

Captain Thornton gave tongue once more as he caught that thought in passing. Adella had looked so charmingly injured while saying the words, yet he knew so well to whom she had reference: not himself, although Bainbridge had shown him very scant courtesy, but that black-avised Ross Montgomery, whose—

"Confound him! Why hasn't he the courage of his convictions? If I could only meet him in a charge, blade to blade—if I only might!"

It was the jealous outburst of a lover who knows his love not returned in full, toward a rival whom he fears is far more blessed.

To do him simple justice, Thornton smothered this fierce jealousy as quickly as possible, forcing himself to think only of the maiden to whose heart he was bearing such bitter grief, and how he could best soften that blow. A crushing one it must be, at best, he told himself.

"And yet, how she can love that surly, overbearing—confound it all! Why can't I forget what—what the poor fellow once was?"

The soldier was riding rapidly, now, along what had been in olden days christened the Carondelet Road, and though he could have charged a battery with a far lighter heart, he was soldier enough to feel that delay would only make a difficult duty still harder to perform.

Even in those days the Road was a favorite building line for the wealthy, and with ample elbow-room, where ground was not too costly for other than multi-millionaires to dream of a lawn or yard in connection with a house, one of the finest residences there was known as the Palmer Place.

Toward this home Frank Thornton rode, leaving his horse at the outer gate, taking a short military cloak from the saddle, and throwing it loosely over his shoulders as the cool night wind struck him with a chill.

And yet, it was more than a frosty air that caused his chill as he glanced over to where those curtained windows cast a subdued light out upon the night.

She was there, little thinking what terrible tidings he was bearing to her ears!

"Brace up, you coward!" Thornton almost savagely addressed himself, then striding swiftly up the broad graveled walk to the spacious veranda which extended along the front of the building.

He did not permit himself to pause or falter again, until he had given the sharp summons which brought—not the middle-aged housekeeper, as he had hoped, but a young, fair, blushing maiden to the door.

Both showed embarrassment, and for a few seconds neither uttered a word. Then Adella Palmer murmured:

"I thought—I was looking for Austin home, and—"

A charming picture the maiden formed, just then, although so plainly attired for a rich heiress; but Frank Thornton had no thoughts for that, with his brain so full, so busy.

In her confusion, Adella had not thought to ask him in, nor did the young officer wait longer for such an invitation. He stepped over the threshold, one hand grasping hers, the other closing the door behind himself, his short cloak drooping unheeded to the floor.

Adella gave a quick, sharp breath, the flush fading away from her cheeks, and her eyes widening as they gazed into that pale, grave face.

She knew something had gone wrong, else Frank Thornton would never act like this, in such sharp contrast to his gentle yet proud deference wherever she was concerned.

"What has happened? You have bad news, Captain Thornton? You have! I can read it in your eyes!"

Adella freed her hand, drawing back a bit, her shapely figure drawn more erect, as though she was bracing her nerves to meet—what?

"I wish I might say no, Miss Palmer," began Thornton, only to be interrupted by the maiden.

"Tell me—now, I beg, sir! Is it—something has happened to—brother Austin?"

"Don't—pray don't, Adella! I beg of you, don't let—Yes," he desperately added, forced to speak plainer by that burning gaze. "An accident has happened to Mr. Bainbridge. He has been hurt, a little, and I thought—there was no one else to bring the news, you see."

After all his thought, only this lame result! Thornton felt like kicking himself, but what could he do, with those great eyes striving to read his very thoughts?

Worse; Adella, losing her own embarrassment, stepped closer to the soldier, her little hands resting upon his shoulders, her eyes holding his as with a spell. She was not only trying, she was actually reading what lay back of those troubled orbs, for she broke out, with a tremor in her full rich tones:

"A little hurt? It is worse—far worse! I can read it in your eyes, and—I feared it! I have long expected just such tidings!"

Her voice choked, and she almost staggered as she fell back to a sofa at the side of the room, sinking upon it, her face buried in her hands.

Captain Thornton stood irresolute for a few moments, but then his cap was tossed aside, and taking a seat beside her, he strove to soothe the young woman as best he might.

He hardly knew what words passed his lips, but the black truth was surely told, for, with a sobbing cry, Adella shrunk away from the arm which almost unwittingly crept around her waist, springing to her feet as she said:

"Where is he? I must go to him—my brother! I must go at once!"

"No, you must not, Miss Palmer," said Thornton, also rising and once more himself.

"You can do no good, and—"

"He is my brother, and all I have—dead, you say?"

"I sadly fear he is, yes."

"I must go to him, I must! You will take me, Mr. Thornton?"

It was doubly hard to deny her in such grief, but Thornton knew he must. And then, with gentle force leading her back to the sofa, he told Adella all he had seen.

It was almost as hard for him to utter, as for her to hear, but the duty was imperative, and he performed it to the best of his ability.

The poor girl shivered and moaned as she heard; as he made clear the reasons why he must deny her even that poor privilege of joining her brother.

The shock would have been terrible enough, under any circumstances, but to learn that Austin had almost surely been murdered, and had been taken in charge of the police and the coroner, that was still more bitter!

And then, having forced himself to tell her all, to make her see how helpless she was to even claim possession of her dead, at present, the soldier lost his enforced control, giving way to his strong love.

"I have been forced to wound you, darling—I, who love you so madly! Give me the right to console you, Adella! Give me the right to avenge your brother, and I'll prove my love so plainly that—"

With a gasping cry, the maiden broke away from his arms, springing to the other side of the room, pulling the bell-cord as she spoke:

"Not now—after such terrible news, sir! I can't—how can you be so cruel as to talk of—and brother lying dead—murdered!"

The housekeeper quickly answered the summons, and as she burst into the room, her florid face showing how greatly she had been startled by that unusually violent ringing, Thornton saw his last frail chance vanish.

"Your mistress has received bad news," he spoke, hastily, picking up his cap and cloak. "She needs your care. Attend to her, and don't—On no account permit her to come to town this night."

"I will not go, if you will promise—Go, Mr. Thornton, and find out how—find out everything, then come back to tell me. You will do this much, for me, my good friend?"

Thornton promised, then hurriedly took his departure, unable to longer bear that pitiful assumption of composure on her part.

CHAPTER VI. MURDER MOST FOUL.

MEETING with instant recognition from the coroner, Old Sobersides hurriedly whispered in that official's ear:

"Too many curious ears and eyes, sir! Don't let a hint leak out, if you can prevent it. You understand?"

The coroner gave a nod of comprehension, then passed through the opening in the crowd, which was made in recognition of his office.

He gravely viewed the body, listened to a few words of explanation from the policemen, then drew forth his note-book as he glanced keenly over the faces of those present.

He was an old hand in office, and cut very little time to waste.

Inside of ten minutes from the time of his arrival, he had his jury selected, and caused each member to carefully view the body, then gave the police permission to take full charge of the dead man.

The coroner drew his jury aside, giving them their instructions, naming the hour for their meeting at his office in the morning.

Meanwhile, the patrol-wagon had come up, and the body was placed within it, then driven rapidly away to the Central Station, as ordered.

At a covert hint from the Old-Style Detective, each officer took charge of one of the two crooks, although, to do them common justice, neither Nipper Noll nor Nosey Clark betrayed any signs of wishing to evade further investigation.

"Tain't no such sweet mouthful, boss," Oliver said, as he moved off, arm-in-arm with burly Officer Pulteney, "but we're white 'nough to do our duty when it comes at us bald-headed, so to speak. Yes, sir, we be, though you don't 'pear like you could think that way."

"It's like givin' a dog a bad name, then kickin' him 'cause it sticks so tight he can't shake it off!" contributed Nosey Clark.

"You took the name without giving, Nosey, and it's rather late in the day for you to growl about it," grunted Jordan.

"Well, this is one time we're playin' white, anyway."

"Lucky you, if you can make the chief believe so much."

A damper fell upon the crooks, and neither one had more to say. If they were really striking out a new line, for them, this could hardly be called an auspicious beginning.

Old Sobersides merely waited long enough to feel certain there was no chance for either of the two crooks to escape from the officers in charge, then hurried off, making his way to the Central Station, where the chief of police held his office.

His well-known face procured him instant admission, and he found the chief in waiting, word having reached him of the murder.

Sober quickly made known the result of his mission to The Patch, then fell back, leaving his superior's question concerning the murder unanswered. The trample of heavy footsteps, announcing the coming of the officers in charge, was sufficient excuse for this reticence.

The two witnesses, real or pretended, were ushered into the office, and the chief listened gravely to the report made by his officers. It was brief and strictly to the point.

They had been upon their regular beat, when Pickett and Clark came up with word of a killing not very far distant.

"We couldn't take it all in at first, your Honor," added Jordan, "for we hadn't either of us heard any shooting, but we fell to work, of course. We found the body, right enough, as of course you already know."

"Yes. I've had a look at it before you came in. The sound would naturally be muffled, since the muzzle of gun or pistol must have fairly touched the poor fellow's head when the shot was fired."

"It was just a splunk, like, your Honor!" cried Nipper Noll, with ghoully eagerness in voice and in black eyes. "Not like a clear shot, but just—well, *splunk* is near's I can make it, sir."

The last words came in an altered manner, and the crook visibly cowered before that keen, searching gaze. Octavius Zouche, then chief of the metropolitan police force in St. Louis, carried a precious keen eye in his shapely head, and Nipper Noll was not the first, by many, who had drawn back from it with a sensation of being pierced through and through with those cold gray orbs.

Solomon Sober frowned a bit as he stood back, taking notes. He gave his under lip a thoughtful pinch with finger and thumb, always a token of annoyance with him.

He saw both Nipper Noll and Clark shrink, but he knew it was simply such dread as all of their class might feel when brought into that presence. If really guilty of such an atrocious crime, they would show something worse than that, he felt morally certain.

In all probability Chief Zouche felt pretty much the same conviction, for his grave face grew lighter, and there was even a touch of friendliness in his tones as he spoke again:

"I've heard a worse definition, Pickett, Jordan, Pulteney?"

The officers saluted.

"Go see that no outsiders are admitted to the dead-room, Jordan. And you can stand guard at my door, Pulteney, please."

Saluting again, the officers turned and left the room. Whatever their curiosity might be to hear more, neither of them dared show as much in face or in action. The chief was the chief, and all of the force were fully aware of that important fact.

Only Old Sobersides remained in the room with the head of police and the two witnesses, but neither Nosey nor Nipper seemed greatly relieved by this lessening of ears to hear the tale they had to tell.

"Now I'll listen to you, gentlemen," quietly observed the chief, settling back into his office chair, a half-sleepy expression coming into his strong, soldierly face. "You saw—just what?"

The two crooks hesitated briefly, interchanging quick glances. For once Nosey Clark was willing for his pal to take the lead, giving him a nod to that effect.

"You first, Pickett," decided Zouche.

"Is it just the killin', your Honor, or shall I tell you how we happened to come there, first?"

"Begin at the beginning, Pickett, and give me the whole story."

"Well, sir, 'tain't so mighty easy to tell, with you lookin' at a fellow, but—you know pretty much what sort o' lads we be?"

"Crooks, born and bred, of course. Don't play bashful at this late stage of the game, Pickett."

"A poor body can't live honest, sir, and so—well, Nosey and me was keepin' an eye out for a raise, you understand? And we was hangin' 'round one of the tony shops; French John's, you know?"

"A cut above your caliber, but go on, please."

"Well, we just happened to see Bainbridge—every sporting man knows him, your Honor—flirtin' a roll of bills, big as my arm! And as he 'peared to be hitting the bottle right smart, with a full cargo already in the hold, Nosey and me reckoned it'd pay us to keep our eyes on the sport a bit longer."

"Boil it down, Pickett. You followed the gentleman, of course?"

"Yes, sir, we followed him. We reckoned maybe he'd lose his roll, anyway, showing it so mighty reckless, and—well, if any one was to pick it up, why shouldn't it be us poor devils?"

"French John's a pretty long step from where the body was found," quietly observed Sober.

"Why did you wait so long, Oliver?"

"Because we were afraid of the cove who was with him, don't you see, sir?" shrewdly answered the pickpocket.

Having given the clew he thought needed, the detective said nothing more, just then, knowing that Zouche would pick it up.

"What cove was that, Pickett?" the chief asked, a bit more sharply.

"You tell, for neither o' us can't, sir."

"Cannot, or will not?"

"Just can't, 'long of not knowing who the cully was, sir. Did we, Nosey?"

"That's straight, your Honor. We saw him with Bainbridge at French John's, and they left his shebang, arm-in-arm together. I reckoned to Nipper that a hawk above our buzzard was already on the scent of that roll, but he didn't think that way."

"Because he didn't look it, sir," hastily explained Pickett. "He was a soldier, from his regimentals, and I heard him called major, more than once, while we kept an eye on the loaded sport."

"Describe him, please."

Pickett obeyed, giving a fairly accurate picture of the very man whom Solomon Sober had seen in company with Austin Bainbridge, less than an hour before that killing must have taken place.

"That will do. If we need to follow it up, I reckon we can find out all about him at French John's. Was he the man who fired the shot, do you think, Oliver?"

Nipper Noll's black eyes opened widely, and an expression of almost stupid wonder came into his swarthy face.

"I don't—What did you say, sir?"

"Did this soldierly-looking fellow kill Bainbridge, then?"

"No, sir! Ask Nosey, if you don't believe me, for he—"

"Nosey will take his turn, later, if necessary. Just now you are in the sweat-box, Pickett. Go on. Tell me your tale after your own fashion, but tell it straight. If you leave too many kinks, one of them may get about your own neck, and that would be unlucky—for you!"

Once again Solomon Sober frowned and pinched his under lip. Nipper Noll seemed cowed, but surely not through conscious guilt!

The detective could hardly have explained this disappointment, even to himself. Why should he wish either or both of these miserable crooks to be shown guilty of such an atrocious crime?

He could not tell. All he knew, was that he felt a vague dread, a dim, indistinct foreboding as of evil to come.

On whom, or why?

Once more, he could not tell. And that vague uneasiness gave him far more trouble than he would have cared to admit, even to himself.

Nipper Noll plucked up nerve, squarely meeting that keen though partly-veiled gaze.

"They say the truth can't hurt a body that is playin' white, your Honor, and that's just what we're doin': Nosey and me. If we had anything to be afraid of, why did we hurry off to the cops? There's mighty little love wasted atwixt us, you must know."

"I was wrong, and I withdraw my caution, Pickett," said Zouche, with a grave bow. "Go on. You followed these two men, you were saying: tell what followed, please."

"Yes, sir. We followed the two sports, thinkin' maybe the red headed covey would drop off: and so he did, too!"

"Just where, please?"

Nipper Noll glibly named the street and locality, then resumed:

"They had some little chatter afore partin', but we didn't care to risk gettin' too mighty close, you understand? If we had, maybe the other cully would have smoked the trick, and stuck to the loaded sport until he'd piloted him safe under shelter."

"So, you see, we just lay close while they chinned a bit under the lamplight, then each went his way, Bainbridge turning off toward the levee. That looked like a good thing for us, and we shadowed him a good bit further. You know why: it's a nasty place for a fat roll, down yonder, sir!"

"I know. Go on. You're making too long a tale of it, for all to be strictly square, I'm afraid, Pickett."

"Twas square as a die, far's Nosey an' me was concerned, sir," the pickpocket hastened to observe, with a half-rueful grin on his swarthy

face. "But there isn't so mighty much more to tell, your Honor."

"We reckoned 'twouldn't be smart to run much longer chances, for it's first come, first served, with crooks, your Honor! And so, we was creepin' up nigher, meanin' to pinch the boodle while we might, but just as Bainbridge was passing by the lamp on the corner—I reckon you know the place, sir?"

"I know it, yes. Go on."

"Well, then, you know how deep an' shaded the doorways are, right there? And just as we were thinkin' to pinch the roll at the next alley, we saw a cove jump out of one o' the doorways, and say somethin' mighty harsh to the sport. Then—It come like winkin', sir!"

"The cove just rammed a gun to his head, and let blizzer!" excitedly broke in Nosey Clark. "We saw him plain, as he turned to run off."

"Plain enough to identify him, do you mean?" sharply asked Zouche.

"Plenty, sir," broke in Nipper Noll. "'Twas the sport they call Ross Montgomery—I'll take my dying oath to that, your Honor!"

CHAPTER VII.

NIPPER NOLL'S DEFENSE.

CHIEF ZOUCHE betrayed not the slightest emotion at this truly startling announcement, but Solomon Sober gave an involuntary ejaculation, his strong hands clinching tightly, as though they itched to be at the lying throat of the knave who was thus doing his level best to swear away the life of a fellow-being.

Nipper Noll glanced his way, then shrunk back, fear marking his face the while, but Nosey Clark showed more nerve, just then.

"Truth is truth, and we're not to blame if it cuts deep, I reckon."

The chief turned toward the detective, gravely asking:

"Did you speak to me, Mr. Sober?"

"No, sir," Old Sobersides said, regaining his self-control by a powerful effort. "I'll wait until my turn comes round."

"Don't wait for that, if you see a point I'm letting slip, Sober."

"Thanks: I'll trust you for that, sir."

"Go on, Pickett. Your turn will come, Clark, so have patience."

If nothing else, that interruption gave Nipper Noll time in which to steady himself, and with more confidence than he had shown up to that time, he once more took up the thread of his evidence.

"It came about just that way, your Honor. A fellow jumped out from the deep doorway, callin' the sport a name of some sort: nothin' too sweet, I reckon, though we was too far off to catch it just right."

"Careful, Oliver. Leave off all frills and embroidery, please."

"Which I'm doin' the best I know how, sir. It sounded more like a solid cussin' than anything else, for I can take oath there was a 'devil' into it; I heard that word, if I didn't anything worse."

"Well, the sport just took a sort of half-turn toward the covey out o' the dark, and we heard him spit out a name: that was plenty plain, and could 'a' been heard full twice our furness, as Nosey can back me up in saying, your Honor."

"I just can, sir, and that name was Ross Montgomery, your Honor."

"Does that agree with your recollection, Pickett?"

"Well, sir, I heard the last name plain enough to swear to, and I'm mighty nigh certain 'twas so with the first," gravely replied the pickpocket, speaking like one who feels a human life may hang upon his testimony. "Nosey's got keener ears than I have, but I'm only speaking for myself. I heard Bainbridge call out that one name, 'Montgomery,' sharp and plain as Nosey's nose, sir!"

"You could hardly mistake it, then, I should say," said the chief, with a slight twitching of his grizzled mustaches. "Go on, please."

"That was all: just a-cussin', short and sharp, a call out of that name, then the littlest fellow jumped in with his gun, and let 'er off!"

"All this, ye mind, sir, pretty well under the street-lamp, where we could see the whole racket, yet I never once thought of more'n a bit of a row, until that gun did go off: *splunk!*"

Nipper Noll shivered as he spoke, his face paling a bit under the steady gaze of the Old-Style Detective. That sound had deeply impressed him, for this at least was not all acting.

"You could see everything, you say?" asked Zouche.

"Pretty much as if 'twas all goin' on right in this room, sir."

"Then, of course, you would have seen Bainbridge had he struck at the other man, first?"

"Couldn't have helped seein' it, your Honor, but he didn't do nothin' o' the sort. Never even raised the cane he was totin', but mebbe that was 'cause he didn't have time. The other cove played mighty quick. It was come and go, with jest long 'nough stop for the one shot, sir."

"You didn't try to hinder that shot?"

"How could we, your Honor? It come afore we knew what was in the wind. He just give

that cussin' call, then rammed his pistol to where it'd do the most good—*ugh!*"

"Go on. It's too late for grunting or groaning, Oliver. After the shot, what came next?"

"Bainbridge just dropped, like lightnin' had struck him, sir, and he hadn't more'n struck the pavement than Montgomery was off, down the street, headin' like he was in a hurry to hit the river."

"You call the one who did the killing, Montgomery; why are you so confident on that point, Pickett?"

"Well, there was the name the sport called out, for one thing, and then there were our eyes; we both had a fair look at him, under the lamp-light, and we saw his face mighty nigh as plain as we see yours, right now, your Honor."

Nipper Noll spoke quietly, but with perfect conviction. If he was speaking other than the simple truth, then he had learned his part to perfection.

"You know Ross Montgomery by sight, then?"

"Yes, sir. He's been in town a good spell, and bein' a bit of a high roller—well, we've seen him too often to make a mistake."

"Then you didn't jump to a conclusion, having heard of his row with Bainbridge, early this evening?" asked Zouche.

"No, sir. We *did* hear of that, while watchin' the sport, but it had all passed out of my mind long afore the killin'. We was on business, you know, sir," with a half-sheepish grin, "and that sort don't leave much room for outside thinkin'."

"You say the man who did the killing ran off in the direction of the levee; why didn't you follow, to track him down?"

"Well, your Honor, he had a gun, and neither of us didn't," frankly answered the pickpocket. "I'm not a slugger, no more than Nosey is. I'd heap sight rather run than fight, even with a little covey. And we *did* run, too, first off."

"Nosey wanted to keep on runnin', your Honor, but I said better not. I said it was best to hunt up a cop and tell him just what we'd seen. Nosey kicked; he wanted to git clean out o' the way, lettin' it come to light of its own way, but I reckoned that'd make it still worse for us if anybody had happened to see us shadowin' the sport. See?"

Chief Zouche smiled slightly at that shrewd look, as though he could fully appreciate the point Nipper Noll was trying to make. But his next question showed how little confidence he placed in either witness.

"What made you hide your pistols, before calling the police, Noll?"

"Hidin'—cross my heart, sir, if we had any guns to hide!" half-indignantly spluttered the pickpocket. "We wouldn't dast to tote 'em, your Honor, bein' so well known to the cops as we be. They'd pinch us, too mighty sudden, just for that. You know it, sir?"

"Well, let that point pass for now, Pickett. I dare say you thought you were playing it marvelously fine, giving the alarm yourselves."

"We done what we reckoned was our duty, sir."

The chief leaned forward, catching Nipper Noll's right hand, holding it up in the gas-light, turning it around for a closer examination. The pickpocket shivered perceptibly at that firm grip, but made no attempt to break away, although a puzzled light came into his dark eyes the while.

"Did you stop to wash your hands, Pickett? How else did you keep blood from spattering over them?"

Nipper Noll let his lower jaw drop, but it was from pure amazement. Then a ray of light seemed to pierce his mental darkness, and the ghost of a smile came into his swarthy face.

"They're not to say over-clean, sir, but they're not that sort of dirty," he said, coolly enough. "You're pretendin' to make out *we* did the job, but you can't really think it, knowin' us both as you do. Are we that sort, your Honor?"

"You admitted following Mr. Bainbridge for the purpose of robbing him, Pickett. If he caught you at it, I reckon you'd rather break away than be sent over the road; wouldn't you?"

"Not bad enough to turn a bit of boodle-pinchin' into a scraggin', sir," quickly answered the crook. "You know our size, chief. You know we're sneaks, not killers. You can make us do time for what we 'lowed to do, but you can't fix anything worse onto us, this bout."

"So you say, Pickett, but I'm not quite that certain."

"Well, sir, there's one more point in our favor: if we'd done so much, wouldn't we 'a' done more? Wouldn't we have gone through his clothes, before lettin' on to the cops?"

"Perhaps so, if you weren't so badly scared out of the notion."

"Does it look that way, honest, now, sir. Wasn't we the very first to give out word of the killin'? If we was nervy 'nough to hunt up a cop so soon, wouldn't we been cool 'nough for to pinch the stuff, first? You *know* we would, sir!"

Nipper Noll spoke with unusual boldness for him, but he felt that he had made a good point,

and ought to make the most of it, while the chance remained.

Nosey Clark nodded his approval, and seemed eager to add his testimony to that given by his pal, but Chief Zouche did not give him the chance, just then.

His trained face gave no sign of belief or incredulity, and neither of the witnesses could say which way his mind inclined, just then. When he so willed, that face was equal to a marble mask, as many a criminal had long since learned, to his sorrow.

"Well, Pickett, you've had your say, and acquitted yourself fairly well, all things considered. You may be innocent, or you may be holding back the real facts; that remains to be seen."

"I've run it off, straight as a string, your Honor."

Chief Zouche touched the silver call-bell which stood upon his desk, and as the door opened in response, he spoke to the policeman:

"Show these men to their rooms, Pulteney, and see that neither of them does any talking. If they try to exchange words, either with each other or any outsider, put them where they simply can't."

Cowed, fear in faces and trembling figures, the two crooks were led away by the stalwart officer. As the door closed behind them, Chief Zouche turned toward Old Sobersides with the question:

"Well, Sober, what do you think of it all?"

"That you've heard more lies than truth," came the blunt reply.

"Yet they told a straight enough tale, it seemed. It looks like a black job, but plain enough on its face, after all!"

"I wish I might think so, sir," gravely differed the detective, his face showing far more emotion than he would willingly have exhibited before any other man.

"What do you find fault with, Sober?"

"Well, there's more than enough to fault, looks to me, sir. For one thing, neither Pickett nor Clark is worth trusting. Either one of them would far rather lie than tell the truth, even when the truth would pay them just as well. You know that much, chief?"

"I know they're neither of them very truthful characters," admitted Zouche, gravely, his shaggy brows gathering, his eyes glittering keenly from underneath as they fixed upon the detective's face.

Was he doubting that oft-tried man? That could hardly be, yet this really began to look that way!

If he read that doubt, Old Sobersides gave no sign, and his tone was still more bitter as he spoke again:

"Either one of those crooks would swear his own mother into the hangman's noose for pay, sir, yet you seem willing to accept their bare word against a gentleman of old name and unsullied honor!"

"Hardly on their naked word, Mr. Sober. A man has been done to death, as your own eyes have shown you. Neither Nipper Noll nor Nosey Clark has nerve enough to kill, least of all under a lighted lamp, on a street where a dozen men might come in sight at a single shot. You'd ought to know that much, old friend?"

He paused as if for a reply, but none coming immediately, he added:

"Since it could hardly be either of them, we must look elsewhere, of course, and tell what I'm trying to do. If not Ross Montgomery, then who is the right man?"

"Not Montgomery, I'm willing to stake my life, sir!" earnestly replied the detective, his strong face catching a flush under that keen gaze. "If he did have a quarrel with Bainbridge, as you said, then—"

"He had two, one in the dining-room of the Planter's House, the other at Finley's saloon, both of them this very evening."

"Still, it isn't in the Montgomery blood to kill a man without first giving him a fair chance to defend himself, sir, and if you'll let me take charge of this case, I'll bring the truth to light, or never—"

A rap at the door, then it opened in answer to the chief's voice.

"Montgomery has just been brought in, sir," reported the officer.

CHAPTER VIII.

BEHIND THE BARS.

OLD SOBERSIDES was betrayed into an involuntary ejaculation as this report met his ears, but neither the chief nor the officer paid him attention, just then.

"He gave no trouble, then?"

"Not that I learned, sir. He showed marks of rough usage, but no locust ever gave those marks to him, I'm pretty sure."

"I don't know a better judge than you are, on that point, Jordan," said Zouche, with a half-smile. "Very well. Tell the sergeant you have reported. He'll know what to do. I'll come in good 'ime."

Accepting this as his dismissal, the officer saluted, withdrawing and closing the door, once more.

Then Chief Zouche turned squarely toward the detective, speaking earnestly:

"I thought it best to run no unnecessary risks, Sober, and as soon as word came to me, I sent out word for Montgomery to be brought in. I hardly expected to see him so soon, but that is a disappointment easily gotten over, don't you think?"

Brief though the interval had been, Old Sobersides had time enough in which to recover his wonted composure, if not quite his usual degree of nerve, and even those keen eyes could detect nothing of chagrin in face or in voice as the detective answered:

"It's quick work, sir, but it may all be for the best. This arrest, however, makes the first move I meant to ask permission to play, wholly unnecessary."

"And that move Sober?"

"Was this, of course," with a slight bow.

Chief Zouche gave a low chuckle, seeming to think this sobriety was born of professional chagrin at being forestalled, but he quickly checked his merriment as another gentle rap sounded at his door.

"Come in. Ah, you again, Jordan?"

"Yes, sir. Sergeant bade me tell you orders had been carried out to the letter, sir."

"Thanks. You can go back to your beat, then. Of course you will do no talking to outsiders. If questions are asked, refer them to this office, please."

Saluting, the officer retreated, and as before, Zouche turned toward the detective, a grave smile showing upon his strong face as he spoke:

"Are you willing to take a little ride with me, Sober?"

"Unless you'll grant me a word or two with Montgomery, first, sir."

"Then you were taken in, also, old friend?" with a repetition of that soft, pleased chuckle.

"Didn't you catch sight of that reporter, just back of Jordan, when he came in first?"

"I wasn't looking, but—what is the joke, chief?"

"The joke was concocted expressly to fool the papers, and now I'm ready to explain to you, old man. Montgomery has been arrested, but he has been taken direct to the jail, not brought in here."

"Jordan said—"

"Just what he was bidden, by the sergeant on duty, of course. We arranged it all in advance, to keep the main facts out of the papers, if such a thing is possible. A man was brought here, under arrest, but that man was not Ross Montgomery, you can be sure."

"Jordan spoke his name, though."

"Hardly loud enough for even a reporter's news-hungry ears to catch, though that was an awkward slip on his part, to be sure."

"Enough to set the ink-wells open, you can depend on it," solemly muttered the detective, his brows contracted.

"Well, I tried what I thought was for the best. Do you care to go with me to the jail?"

"If I may see Montgomery, certainly."

"It's for that very purpose I'm asking your company, Sober," said Zouche, leaving his chair, putting on hat and cloak, then leading the way out of the office.

Reporters from two of the morning papers tried to intercept their progress, but the chief blandly referred them to the sergeant in charge for the night, and refused to give them another word.

A closed hack was in waiting before the station, and entering this, the two men were driven rapidly away, in a direction nearly opposite that in which their destination lay.

"It's an infernal nuisance, sometimes, this newspaper squad," the chief said, as he settled himself for the drive. "I'll admit that you often get valuable hints from that source, but, taking it all in a lump, I imagine we'd get along a great deal smoother in our line of business, if never a paper was in existence."

Like many another high official, Octavius Zouche had this as his pet hobby, and under different circumstances Solomon Sober might have sympathized with him, in words as in sentiments. But, just now, he was far more deeply interested in learning why the chief had taken such an unusual course, and he bluntly asked the question: Why had Montgomery been taken to the jail, rather than to the station, to be recorded?

"Because I believe there is more in this affair than a simple murder," came the instant reply. "And so thinking, I wanted to stave off the reporters, with less laudable curiosity, until we had a fair chance to sift the facts for ourselves."

Sober was quieted, if not wholly satisfied, and said nothing more until the hack came to a halt at the rear of the jail, instead of at its front, and regular, entrance.

That their coming was fully expected, was proved by the prompt response to the gentle, peculiar rap which Chief Zouche gave on that rarely-used barrier.

Theodore Ernest admitted them, quickly closing and barring the door, then leading the way by the light which an oddly-garbed woman bore.

The jailer led them into his own house, which closely adjoined the jail proper, and placing the lighted candle upon a little table, the woman

turned to make a profound courtesy to first Zouche, then Sober.

Although the jailer was little less than a giant in size and bulk, this frail, almost emaciated woman bore a striking resemblance to Ernest in features, or, rather, in the expression which those features wore, while at rest.

"Flighty Fan" the woman was called, by those who knew her best, or whom business took more frequently to the jail, and the reason for this sobriquet was to be found in her wild, restless eyes, denoting an unsettled brain, if nothing still sadder.

Still, Flighty Fan had nobly earned her right to a share in her brother Theodore's home and office, as will be shown later on.

Both Zouche and Sober were fairly well acquainted with the poor creature, and gravely responded to her profound salutation, too true gentlemen to slight Flighty Fan, no matter how strong their eagerness to see Ross Montgomery might be.

It was pitiful to see the poor woman, her mental affliction never more strongly marked in face and in eyes than on this occasion.

She wore her customary garb: a plain, well-worn calico dress; a small shoulder-shawl over her shoulders and crossing above her breast, to be confined at her waist; her long, grizzled hair flying loosely down her back, though confined in part by a knotted handkerchief of printed cloth which rested upon her head.

Poor Flighty Fan! Many an unfortunate, still alive, can testify to her royal heart, let her brain be as it might.

Rising from that profound courtesy, Flighty Fan flung out one small hand in an almost tragic gesture, in sad contrast to her soft and even musical tones as she spoke to the chief:

"Your high and regal mightiness is very welcome to this, our humble abode. Ask, and ye shall be served, only—May I beg one brief word with your royal highness?"

"Not one, but a thousand, Miss Ernest," kindly answered Zouche, "The more you ask, the better I'll be pleased, I assure you."

"Don't bother, Fanny," said her brother, with a troubled expression upon his face. "She's more excited than usual, sir, and—"

But Flighty Fan evaded the hand that would have restrained her, and springing close to the chief, her bony hands caught him by the arms, giving him a scornful shake as she shrilly cried:

"Old fool! Blind idiot! You only lack ears and a shaven tail to look the ass you've proven yourself, old fool!"

"Fanny—stop!" cried Ernest, springing forward and breaking that fiercely contemptuous hold. "Don't mind her, sir, for—"

"He is an old fool, and this is to prove it! Call him guilty! The bonny, bonny lad! Guilty! Truth and innocence sticks out all over him, I tell you, old bald-pate!"

With a rush the warden pushed Flighty Fan into another room, closing the door and turning the key upon her, his honest face flushed with shame, and tears moistening his eyes as he said, huskily:

"She don't mean it—she don't know what she was saying, your Honor, so don't lay it up against us, please."

Zouche laughed, though it seemed forced, and his face was still deeply flushed.

"We all owe her too much, Ernest, to hold a grudge. And if I should be unmanly enough to do so, wouldn't that be proof Miss Ernest had based her compliments on a foundation of truth?"

"It's one of her bad nights, you must know, sir," humbly added the jailer, evidently keenly feeling what had taken place. "And I never knew her to take such a strong fancy to any prisoner, as she did to this Montgomery, at first sight."

"Never mention it further, my good fellow. But that reminds me: we came expressly to see this Montgomery. Show us to his cell, please."

To do this, the trio had to cross the narrow courtyard, and as the Old-Style Detective glanced toward the heavens, he saw that day was not far from dawning; a fact which, in the powerful interest he felt in this black-looking case, he had taken no note of until now.

Unlocking the heavy iron door, Ernest led the way direct to Cell 28, in which the recently arrested man had been placed. Another heavy key from that same large bunch, unlocked this cell, and pushing the door open, the jailer simply announced:

"Gentlemen to see you, sir!"

A man sprung to his feet from the low couch upon which he had been lying, and the light of the lantern dimly revealed a pale, bruised face; the face of Ross Montgomery!

His sternly flashing eyes passed over the face of Chief Zouche, as that of an utter stranger, to pause upon the face of the detective.

"Mr. Sober!" he ejaculated. "You—and seeing me thus?"

For an instant he quailed, covering his face with trembling hands, but as the detective stepped forward, gently, almost lovingly touching an arm, he struck that hand aside, once more proudly defiant.

"If you have had part or lot in this foul out-

rage, Mr. Sober, I'll never rest until you've paid the full penalty; I swear it!"

"You are wronging Mr. Sober, sir, whether he is friend or enemy," gravely said the chief, closing the door, leaving Ernest outside. "I gave orders for your arrest, and—"

"By what right? On what charge, I demand, sir?" sternly cried the prisoner, his black eyes fairly aglow with angry pride.

His tones stung the official, who had far less cause than the detective to treat him kindly, and he coldly made answer:

"By the right vested in me as head of the city police force, sir. My name is Zouche. And as for the charge, you stand accused of killing a man, this very night."

Montgomery shrank visibly, but only for a single breath. Rallying, he proudly faced the chief, his tones forcedly composed, to ask:

"Is that all? May I ask the name of the person I am charged with killing, sir?"

"Austin Bainbridge."

For a brief space Montgomery stood like one turned to stone, staring with wide eyes at the stern face of the speaker. Then, with a catch in his breath he gasped forth:

"Austin Bain—impossible! You are lying to me, sir!"

With a deprecatory gesture to the official, Sober stepped forward once more, briefly but clearly telling how the murdered man had been found, then begging Montgomery to prove himself innocent, as he surely could.

Instead, the young man only coldly said that he had nothing to say, until after he could see and consult with his lawyers. And, at length, with that as their only answer, the two men left the prison cell.

CHAPTER IX.

FLIGHTY FAN'S PLEA.

THE day which dawned just after Chief Zouche and Old Sobersides entered the cell in which Ross Montgomery was confined for the time being, had come and gone, with its multitude of petty changes, and with no particular duty to engross her, Flighty Fan Ernest was seated in her own cozy little apartment, knitting and thinking.

Her disordered brain was not past that point; Theodore Ernest was wont to say that 'twas thinking which first brought mind-trouble upon his sister.

Although dressed in much the same fashion as when Chief Zouche made his call at the jail to interview the occupant of Cell 28, Flighty Fan seemed almost another being in face and in eyes.

That painful expression of wildness, almost insanity, had vanished, and one who looked upon her now for the first time would think no worse than that long suffering and bitter grief had brought premature age upon her head.

That would not have been a very wild guess, either, for Fanny Ernest had suffered both long and acutely in her day, and had not her brain partially given way, her life would almost certainly have paid the penalty, instead.

It was a sad, sad story, known now to but very few of their most intimate friends, and one on which brother and sister very seldom touched, although Flighty Fan no longer lost her remaining wits when that once passionately loved name chanced to find mention within her hearing. A story which has been told, times beyond numbering—the tale of man's sinning, of woman's paying his penalty.

All that occurred in another world, Flighty Fan was now accustomed to declare, with her faint, faded smile—a world which was too full of strongly contrasting light and gloom to be recalled, even had she the power.

For many years, now, Fanny Ernest had been in full charge of the women's ward in the city jail, and it was through her valuable services that Theodore Ernest held his position through so many changes of administration.

Twice had Flighty Fan been the principal means of frustrating well-laid plans of escape on the part of the prisoners, and once she had saved human lives at the imminent risk of her own.

It was often said that the Ernests held a life-lease on the jail, and so true was it that had any incoming official tried to oust Flighty Fan from her position, something very like a revolution would surely have broken forth in consequence.

This much had to be recorded, both to explain what has passed, and what was fated to come before another day dawned.

Flighty Fan, then, was comfortably seated in her own room, knitting and thinking, her thoughts partly sad, partly glad, judging from the intermitting frowns and smiles which passed over her thin face.

As Theodore Ernest had taken care to explain to Chief Zouche, after that official's visit to Cell 28, Flighty Fan had taken an instant and extraordinary interest in Ross Montgomery, when she saw him brought in, a prisoner to be carefully guarded.

"Right or wrong, sir, she thinks he favors the devil whose cruelty and crimes upset her poor brain," the jailer added, in explanation of that fiercely contemptuous rebuke. "By rights,

that'd ought to make her hate this fellow, too, but—well, it's the crook in her poor wits, I reckon, your Honor!"

"Don't mention it, Ernest. I hold no grudge, be sure. If I did, I'd hate to own as much," with a little laugh. "Let it take wind that I was opposed to Flighty Fan, and I'd as well take off my badge at once, for others would do it for me, if I didn't do it for myself."

Charging the jailer to treat Ross Montgomery as kindly as that gentleman would permit, but on no account to admit callers who could not show a written order from his hand, Chief Zouche left the jail, this time by the front entrance, since all spies had been thrown off the right scent, as he firmly believed.

Much of all this was passing through Flighty Fan's mind as she sat over her knitting, giving frowns to his enemies, smiles to Ross Montgomery, whenever that darkly-handsome face came to the eyes of her mind.

It was as Ernest declared; in this young man she saw the face of the being, long since dead and turned to dust, whom she had loved beyond the power of words to tell.

Even her poor brain was able to comprehend that it was nothing more than a chance resemblance, for the man she had loved left no kindred behind him; but, had Montgomery really been the son of her dead lover, Fanny Ernest could not have treated him more kindly, sympathized with him more thoroughly.

Her duties as matron of the female ward were separate from that portion of the building in which Cell 28 was located, but Flighty Fan had free access to all parts of the jail, and long before this hour, Ross Montgomery had learned of one faithful friend, at least.

Flighty Fan was startled from her musings by a sound strange enough in itself, but which was instantly recognized by her trained ear, as was proved by herspruiging from her chair across the little room, to press an ear closely to the mouth of a speaking-tube inserted in the wall.

"28—steel cell—alarm!"

Those were the words which caused her sudden spring, and those were the only words which came to her ears; only dim, indistinct sounds came through the speaking tube from the ground floor, sounds which less well-trained ears might not have caught at all.

Flighty Fan's naturally pale face flushed vividly, and her eyes caught an almost fierce glitter as she breathed in the tube:

"Yes—courage!"

That tube had connection with the office used by her brother, the jailer, and, strange as that sound had seemed, Flighty Fan recognized the voice of Theodore Ernest, and instantly took in his full meaning.

She sprung across the floor, flung open the door, running swiftly along through the darkness, perfectly familiar with every foot of the way, thanks to her long residence at the jail.

Instead of turning directly toward the jailer's office, Flighty Fan hastened to the spot where, by common agreement, each night saw the big bunch of jail-keys hidden.

This night was not an exception, and her eager fingers instantly closed upon them, even as she turned her head to peer through the darkness, catching her breath sharply as her acute sense of hearing warned her of serious trouble in her brother's domains.

"Heaven guard him until—Duty first!"

Through her brain flashed that half-prayer, but Flighty Fan never faltered in what she deemed her line of duty. Keys in hand, she sprung onward, across the narrow courtyard, entering the jail proper, relocking the heavy iron door behind her, then peeping as directly as possible for the cell whose number brave Ernest had sounded up the speaking-tube.

Here and there a hanging-lamp was burning, and one of them hung not far from the cell door which bore the number Ernest had pronounced: 28, painted in bold characters.

Dark though the corridor had been through which she rushed, Flighty Fan had already selected the right key, by intuition, it seemed, and inserting it, the strong bolt shot back with a sudden click.

Leaving the bunch of keys dangling there, Flighty Fan jerked the door open, but with the training of many years pulling the barrie to behind her, as she sprung into the cell.

The light from the corridor lamp came in through the unglazed transom over the door, and fell fairly across the face and partially dressed figure of the man, who sprung hurriedly from the low cot upon which he had been lying, if not actually sleeping.

"What means this—" he began, almost sternly, but Flighty Fan, with an odd little sob in her throat, caught his hand, hastily crying:

"The devils—devils are coming, my dear! You must go away from here, and never come back, for—Hark!"

Flighty Fan broke off abruptly in her agitated speech, as a dull, reverberating sound came to their ears; the muffled clank of metal against metal, which could have but one meaning, after that broken warning through the speaking-tube.

"What is it? What do you mean, woman?"

demanding Ross Montgomery, at that ominous sound.

Instead of frightening Flighty Fan, that sound served to calm her excited brain, and when she spoke again, it was after a far different fashion than at first.

"It means that an attack is being made upon the jail, Mr. Montgomery, for the purpose of lynching you."

Montgomery gave a start, turning a shade paler, if such a thing was possible. Even a brave man might well be forgiven for flinching from such an announcement, but he as swiftly rallied.

"Lynchers, you say? Well, let them come! It's the shortest, if not the easiest way out!"

Flighty Fan once more caught his hand, drawing him toward the door, but he resisted, gently yet firmly, even while she was saying:

"Come, boy! They'll murder you, even as they murdered my loved one! Come—for his sake, I beg of you—come!"

Again that ominous sound came rumbling, echoing through the jail. The mob, if mob it was, were attacking the iron doors.

The deadly truth came to Montgomery, then. He knew, intuitively that this attack was made for the express purpose of lynching him, yet he showed no signs of terror, such as even a brave man might well feel before such a terrible peril, unarmed and helpless to defend himself.

"What's the use, madam?" he said, almost coldly, yet pressing that hand kindly the while. "What is to be, will be, and you can only share my fate by lingering here. Go, I beg of you, while you can. If those devils once get inside—Go, I pray, my good woman!"

"Not unless you come with me, sir," declared Flighty Fan, losing the last remnant of her wild, tragic demeanor. "Brother bade me take you to the steel cell, which can't be forced under hours. He bade me do that, first, then give the alarm. Will you keep me here, idle, while the loss of a single minute may mean his death?"

That appeal produced the desired effect, and dropping her hand, Ross Montgomery swiftly put on his coat and hat, saying the while:

"That's different, madam. I'd scorn to run for my own wretched life, but if that of another hangs—"

"Not one, but two, sir," quickly interposed Flighty Fan, as she drew the heavy door open. "I'll share my brother's fate, let that be what it may; but you—are you willing to perish, leaving your proud name sullied for all time? If so, you are no true Montgomery, sir!"

"Will the mob listen to such a plea, think you, madam?" bitterly asked the young man, following Flighty Fan out of the cell, into the corridor.

Despite the loud hammering at the outer doors, Flighty Fan stopped short, facing Montgomery with her dark eyes glittering and her voice, low though it was pitched, stinging sharp with half-scorn:

"Is that bonny face all there is of a man about you, Ross Montgomery? Are you a cur, that you should make a plea to such vile wretches? Have you stolen the face of a man, to hide the heart of a craven?"

A cold smile passed across that bruised face, but that was answer enough for Flighty Fan.

One who could smile in the face of such peril as this, surely was anything but a craven.

Catching his hand once more, she hurried him along the corridor to the door of the little apartment locally known as "the steel cell," then faced him once more, her eyes gleaming catlike through the gloom which reigned in that portion of the passage.

"This is the steel cell, sir. Once locked inside that, and you are safe from the strongest of mobs, for at least an hour longer. Before that hour passes, I can have help here, but—you will still be a prisoner, under charge of foul assassination!"

"A false charge, madam, on my honor as a man."

"Then why submit to arrest? Why give your bitter enemies such a powerful advantage over you? Why not be free, to fight them back with their own weapons?"

"So I might have done, had I even suspected why I was being placed under arrest. Now—well, are you not one of my jailers?"

"I told that fat, pompous idiot he was a long-eared fool," bluntly declared Flighty Fan, an echo of contempt for Chief Zouche in her tone. "But—was I right? You did not kill Austin Bainbridge?"

"In the face of Heaven, madam, I am innocent," earnestly declared Montgomery, neither of them appearing to hear those ominous sounds without. "By the grave of my dead mother, I never harmed Bainbridge."

"Then, this is no place for you, as I felt from the very first!" exclaimed Flighty Fan, catching his hand between hers, and almost forcing him away from the door of the steel cell. "Your place is out in God's free air, working to prove your innocence and bring punishment upon all those who would cut your young life short."

"You mean—how can I gain freedom, dear woman?"

"By accepting it when offered, as I am offer-

ing it now!" half-impatiently spoke the woman, hurrying him along through the gloom. "Quick! hasten, unless you wish to bring the vengeance of yonder mob upon the heads of brother and myself! Only promise me—nay, then, I'll ask no pledge, save that you'll defeat your bitter enemies, and not let another black crime send his dear face to the grave."

Her voice broke, and Montgomery was too nearly bewildered to say or do aught else than yield to her feverish guidance. And almost before he could realize what all this meant, Flighty Fan unlocked another door, opening it wide enough to push him through, then hastily closing and locking it behind him.

Then, just as Montgomery caught sight of the twinkling stars, a hand closed upon his shoulder and a deep voice spoke the words:

"You're just the man I was looking for, Ross Montgomery!"

CHAPTER X.

THE WORK OF JUDGE LYNCH.

THEODORE ERNEST was no great hand for reading, although he made it a point to glance through the city journals, morning and evening, yet, even the sensational columns relating to the killing of Austin Bainbridge, and minor events connected therewith, could not keep the worthy jailer from occasionally nodding in his chair that evening.

If those prints were to be believed, the city was worked up to a feverish pitch by that foul assassination, and, while there were minor discrepancies, as there always is, all of the papers, both morning and evening, united in declaring that the more than suspected murderer had already been placed under arrest.

Despite the precautions taken by Chief Zouche, the name of Ross Montgomery was in all of the accounts, and he was unanimously declared the slayer. Long accounts were given of the two quarrels which the dead and the living had had earlier in the evening, and there were a few thinly-veiled hints as to a lady in the case.

On only one point did the reporters seem entirely in the dark: that was as to Montgomery's being confined in the jail rather than at the Central.

Theodore Ernest was smiling grimly over this point, when a sharp summons sounded at his office-door, and letting his chair down on all its legs with a thump, the jailer crossed the room, pausing at the door to turn a small slide, then peered through the opening which that usually concealed, asking:

"Well, who are you, and what do you want?"

"Officer 43, sir, with a prisoner, under guard. Chief Zouche sent us. Open up, please."

Without a thought of evil, the jailer unlocked and opened the door, for he had sighted a man in police dress without. But then, swift as thought, several burly figures with black masks drawn over their faces sprung upon him, grasping his hands and arms before he could draw a weapon with which to repel that attack.

"Hold fast, but don't harm him," said the man in police garb, but now with cloth mask pulled down from under his helmet completely hiding his face. "And you, jailer, play sensible! We're after Ross Montgomery, and you've got to help us find him, too!"

For a single breath it seemed as though their capture was about to be effected without the slightest difficulty, but then, rallying from his brief stupor, the jailer began a desperate struggle, flinging off hand after hand, dragging his assailants across the room until they bumped heavily against the further wall.

It was only one man against half a dozen, all burly, muscular fellows, but Theodore Ernest was an athlete when fairly aroused, and he never made a harder fight in all his eventful life than right now.

He heard that demand, and readily guessed what it meant. And then, with a super human effort, he tore himself free, just as he gained the point where the mouth of the speaking-tube was cunningly concealed back of a carved bracket.

"28—steel cell—give alarm!"

He had barely time to sound those words, his tones hardly articulate to his assailants, even could they have deciphered his full meaning, when back came the ruffians, striking hard and viciously.

He of the police garb was one of the foremost, now, and no doubt he took to himself full credit for that speedy victory; for, stunned and bleeding from half a score bruises, the jailer gave way, sinking to the floor in a panting heap.

"Easy—let up, lads!" warningly spoke their leader, as he drew himself clear, springing to the office door to call in low tones: "Come in, fellows, but keep the rest out for a time."

Knowing that he had done all that lay in his power, Ernest made no further struggle, feigning unconsciousness for a time, giving no answer to the fierce questions which were poured upon him during those first few seconds.

"Curse the fool!" growlingly cried the leader of the mob, more than half deceived by that figned unconsciousness. "He can't, or won't, speak, so—hunt for the keys, all of you!"

The office was speedily ransacked, but without finding the keys to the adjoining jail, and

while a few extended their search further, the leader and two chosen aids gave their care to reviving the jailer.

Theodore Ernest, despite his many hurts, was never more fully upon the alert than right then, but he kept up that pretense as long as he dared, in order to give Flighty Fan time in which to execute the plan which they had so often rehearsed together.

But when the leader of the mob struck a match, holding it close to the end of his nose, even his nerve could stand no more, and with a painful sneeze, Ernest struggled to arise.

"Get up, if you like, old man, but play easy, or you'll go down again, to stay put," came the stern warning. "We've come to interview one of your guests, Ernest; where do you keep the jail-keys?"

"I don't keep 'em, after night, sir," faintly mumbled Ernest. "The chief always takes charge, and—"

A sharp stroke across the lips cut his words short, but with such heavy odds against him, open resentment of an insult was out of the question, and he quietly submitted.

"You lie, but that can't save you. We want Ross Montgomery, and we mean to have him, if we have to burn the old rookery down, first! Show up the keys, or you'll never live to see the blaze started, old man!"

"What I haven't got, I can't give you, sir," meekly answered the jailer. "You may murder me, but—"

Once more his lips were blocked by a heavy hand, and with eyes glittering evilly through the slits in his sable mask, the leader spoke:

"What's the sense in playing fool, Ernest? If you're playing to gain time, you might as well give over the thought. Even if an alarm should go forth, we've force enough to hold the police in check until we've finished accounts with our man."

"We've come prepared to force the doors, if necessary—that is proof for you!" as the sullen clang of a sledge-hammer against iron doors came from the jail itself. "If we have to break in, we'll turn every prisoner loose, to go their own way, but if you'll hand over the keys, we'll leave everything as we find it, with one exception."

"Will you do that?" Take your choice and take it quick!"

"What exception do you mean, sir?"

"Ross Montgomery, of course. We've come for him, and have him we will, though a score such bull-headed idiots as you tried to bar our way!" came the stern response.

"He isn't here, for—"

"You lie! He is here, and we know it!"

"I'd surely know if he was, but I tell you again, sir, there is no such person confined in the jail."

"Prove it, then, by handing over the keys, so we can search the old rookery. If Montgomery isn't there, we'll agree to leave all else just as we found it. But—tell us where your keys are hidden, or I'll raise your roof, too sudden!"

His revolver came into sight, but a sharp, shrill scream rung forth as a door was flung wide, and Flighty Fan, each hand armed with a pistol, sprung to the side of her brother, her grizzled hair flying, her face filled with anger and fear—for Theodore, not herself.

"Back, you hounds!" she cried, lifting her weapons, with fingers on the triggers. "Harm my brother, and I'll shoot to kill!"

"Do and he'll die, sure!" retorted the leader, without flinching, though that weapon was covering his broad bosom, the other menacing his companions. "I've got him lined, as you can see for yourself, ma'am."

He spoke no more than the truth, and so Flighty Fan saw. Had only her own life been menaced, she would never have hesitated, but she loved her brother far more than herself, and as he turned what seemed to the ruffians an appealing glance into her face, Flighty Fan faltered.

"Spare him—for his sake, I beg you, gentlemen!" she said, her tones growing husky.

She returned that look, and then, his worst fears set at rest, the jailer muttered, faintly:

"I can't—we've done all we can, Fanny."

"What is it you want, sir?" she asked, of the seeming chief. "You are here after some one: who is it?"

"Ross Montgomery, the devil who murdered Austin Bainbridge."

"He isn't here, sir, on honor."

"Then you ought to be willing to save worse trouble, ma'am. Prove what you say, and we'll go as we came, empty-handed."

"Do it, sister. We can't fight back an army."

"Stop those fools, hammering on the doors, then," said Flighty Fan, lowering her weapons, like one willing to yield to reasonable terms. "You swear not to turn the prisoners loose?"

"Yes, we'll leave them all with you, save Montgomery. Him we want, and him we'll have, too! Now—where are the keys?"

Like one yielding to a disagreeable necessity, Flighty Fan led the way to the spot where she had replaced the bunch of keys, and bidding a chosen few guard brother and sister, to make sure they gave no further trouble, the leader

quickly opened the doors which had defied the rude assault made upon them.

"Scatter, and search every cell!" he cried, as entrance was gained. "Make 'em show up at the wickets, and if any can't pass inspection, or won't show their faces, keep guard, and pass the word along to me."

Bidding three of his trusted men follow him, the leader hastened along until his eye was caught by the painted figures upon one of the closed cells.

"I heard him say something about Cell 28," he hastily explained, while trying the keys from the big bunch. "If it's our man—well, you know what to do, first thing, I reckon!"

"You bet we do, boss! Just show him up, and—"

The lock yielded, and the heavy door was flung open. A rush was made for the low cot, where the tumbled bed-clothes for an instant deceived them all; but then their mistake was recognized.

"Not here! Some one has been, and I'm thinking that hag— Out, and search every cell, boys!"

In savage haste that search was begun, but as far as it was permitted to progress, precious little consolation met the lynchers. Prisoners were found, but none of them were to be mistaken for the man they wanted, and long before that search could be made thoroughly complete, an alarm came from one of the guards who had been left in charge of the jailer and Flighty Fan.

"Skin out, all, or we'll catch Satan!" he cried, affrightedly. "The cursed cavalry is closin' in, and I'm— Save yourselves, I say!"

The report was a true one, and the lynchers rushed to escape, finding the mob left outside had already been scattered by the troops under command of Captain Frank Thornton.

CHAPTER XI.

THE OLD STYLE DETECTIVE.

ROSS MONTGOMERY was taken completely by surprise, for both words and touch came without the slightest warning that a living person was nearer to him than Flighty Fan, who was hurrying away through the darkness, to complete the work she had so bravely begun.

Only a few moments before, he had seemed rather more than inclined to reject a chance for escape; but all that was changed, now he had caught one full breath of free air; and lacking more efficient weapons, he tried to strike that dimly-seen figure with his clinched fists.

Deft hands grasped his wrists, checking the blows ere they could make full connection, and there came sharply:

"Don't be a fool, young man!"

Montgomery recognized that voice, with a little cry of angry surprise, trying to break away from the strong grip as he spoke:

"You, Sober? One of the cowardly gang, helping lynch law?"

"I'm here to save, if you'll let me do it, Montgomery," came the instant response, holding his grip with seeming ease. "Listen! Do you want to be fairly caught in a storm like that, boy?"

The attack upon the jail doors sounded fiercer than ever, sending ugly echoes through that gloomy structure, giving the younger of those two listeners a cold chill that savored of the grave.

Not alone the sledge-hammers' lusty pounding, but still more ominous sounds disturbed the night air; sounds from human throats, yet more deadly, more pitiless than ravening beasts ever gave vent unto; a dull, partially suppressed roar, which few can forget who have once heard, and never he for whom that cry for blood has found birth.

Old Sobersides paused barely long enough to permit the young man to fairly catch those ugly sounds, then spoke again:

"You hear them, youngster? They're the hounds of grim death, and they are howling for your life-blood!"

"And you?"

"Oh, I'm a hound of quite another breed, dear fellow," with a low, pleased chuckle, as he shifted grip with one hand, to place himself arm-in-arm with Montgomery. "While they're here to kill, I'm trying to save. Come, man! Do you want a pack of those devils climbing all over us? If they think to send a squad around this ide— Come, I say!"

Montgomery offered no further resistance, though it could hardly be said he took to flight. Solomon Sober did all the hurrying, and there was a touch of unusual irritation in his voice as he muttered:

"Your feet weigh a ton, boy! Faster, and lighter! What's to hinder some of the gang remembering what I thought of—the back door? And if they should, to sight us now—well, there'd be two the less for breakfast in the morning!"

Although hardly knowing what to think, Montgomery stepped out a bit more briskly, muttering something about a choice of evils, at best, but as Old Sobersides pulled him into the

dark mouth of the first alley they came to, he hung back, speaking more sharply, though still in a plainly puzzled tone:

"I say, what does all this mean, anyway?"

The Old-Style Detective improved the chance for a keen look back in the direction from whence they had come, as though rather more than expecting chase was being made; but seeing nothing to increase his alarm, he answered Montgomery, curtly:

"Can you ask, after those sounds, boy? It means lynching, to make the whole world believe the slayer of Austin Bainbridge has paid the full penalty!"

"I never—Heaven be my witness, sir," a sudden catch coming into his voice. "I never harmed that poor fellow, much less murdered him!"

"What good will that knowledge do you, though, if you take it out of the world with you? Can't you even begin to see, Montgomery? Can't you understand why they're running such long chances on the single one of saving the guilty, by branding the innocent?"

Ross Montgomery gave a start, half-shrinking as if from a blow. But even yet his suspicions seemed stronger against the man in whose company he had so unexpectedly been cast, than against those howling thugs and human off-scourings, yonder.

"And you? How much better—" he began, only to be cut short by the detective, who knew how much risk they were running through loss of so many precious moments.

"Hardly an angel, perhaps, but if I was one of yonder devil-gang, wouldn't I be turning you over to their tender mercies, in place of offering you safety? And that's just what I am offering you, boy, if you'll accept it at my hands."

"You're a detective, and—how came you waiting at that door?"

"Shall I strike a light and show you my commission, sir?" impatiently sneered the irritated officer. "Shall I summon witnesses to prove that I had a perfect right to— Come, young man: you're surely not all foolish?"

"Maybe you'd find me easier to handle if I was such!"

A warning thrill quivered through the arm which Old Sobersides was holding, but without an effort to check the threatened break-away, he voluntarily set Montgomery free, clasping both hands behind his back as he coldly uttered:

"I meant to ask your word of honor, sir, not to break away, before setting you at liberty; but now—if you have so many true friends that you can't find use for another, go your way, and I'll try to forget your father ever had a son so differently constituted. For he, at least, would be ashamed to condemn a man unheard."

Ross Montgomery, his brain partially unsettled by all the bitter black trouble which had come so unexpectedly upon him of late, had fully resolved to break away, even though to make his escape good, he must kill or stun this hound of the law.

Now, since all obstacles to that flight were voluntarily removed, he hesitated, doubts of another quality coming into his mind.

Old Sobersides saw this, but his voice was cold and grave as he added the words:

"Go, if you like, Ross Montgomery. I have been your firm friend up to this minute. I've worked almost without ceasing, even to sleep or to eat a bite, hoping to prove you innocent of this foul crime, by bringing to light the bottom facts. But now—go your way, I say! Go your way, and take with you this warning:

"I'll grant you one full hour's law, then I'll take your trail, to run you down again, though you try to hide as man never hid before!"

"I never harmed him," huskily muttered Montgomery. "I'm innocent as the unborn babe, although—I'm free from that crime, I say, man!"

"So I've held until now, young man, but when you shrink from me, simply because I'm a detective, what else can I do but alter that belief?"

"It's because you are a detective, sir, that I—"

The rapid trampling of human feet upon the paved street came to their ears, and with a quick movement Old Sobersides caught Montgomery by an arm, his other hand closing tightly over his lips as he drew the young man deeper into the alley-mouth, whispering:

"Not a sound, if you love life and liberty! The alarm has been sent in, and the police are coming, but—"

A squad of helmeted guardians trotted past the narrow opening, and the Old-Style Detective dared say no more, just then. Not a dozen yards separated them from the officers, and the slightest sound might bring a stern charge their way.

Fortunately, however, the police had thoughts only for the work in advance, and their eyes were kept straight ahead as well.

Solomon Sober felt Montgomery shivering in his grasp as those figures came within his view, and a rarely erring instinct told him the coming of the police was making his self-imposed task far more easy than it otherwise would have proved.

Innocent though he declared himself, Ross Montgomery felt that he would rather die than be placed under arrest again.

Something of this the shrewd detective divined, but he kept his hand over those lips until the squad had fairly passed beyond the mouth of the alley, and all danger from word or ejaculation catching their notice was at an end.

Then he removed his hand, to quickly whisper:

"If I was the sort of fellow you seem to think, young man, wouldn't I jump at a chance like that? What more easy than to have run you out, right into their grip?"

"I'd rather die!"

"And I'd rather you'd live, to help me show up the real killer of young Bainbridge, my boy," grimly amended the detective, releasing the arm he had grasped, and tiptoeing to the alley-mouth, there to cast a swift, searching glance in opposite directions, in turn.

He seemed to have no thought of the other taking to his heels, and possibly this was an additional reason why Montgomery remained in his company. Trust begets trust, say what you please.

Ross came silently to the side of Sober, looking and listening, only the quick clutching of his fingers on the detective's arm betraying his real excitement as a new sound came to their ears.

Rising above the sullen roar of the mob, came the mellow, subdued notes of a bugle, and Old Sobersides drew erect, rubbing his hands briskly as he said:

"I reckoned 'twas about time for the figure to change!"

"It's a cavalry-call!"

"Yes, and the call is for yonder rabble, confound 'em!"

"You speak as if— Who and what are you, sir?"

"Not your worst enemy, young man, though you've acted pretty much as though you felt that way. Still, I didn't run you out for the cops to take charge, did I?"

"No, and I'm grateful—more grateful than there's time to tell, just now, sir."

"You're right, and if that gratitude is strong enough to last you through this alley in my company, reckon we'd better be trying it on."

With hand on Montgomery's arm, rather as guide than as captor, the Old-Style Detective turned away from the lighted street, hurrying along that narrow, gloomy passage.

Without word of objection or sign of further distrust, Ross bore Old Sobersides company, only pausing when the veteran came to a halt, far away from where that hurried flight had begun.

During this retreat, sounds coming from near the jail told them something of the truth: there were shouts and yells, mingling with occasional bugle-blasts, but never a shot fired. And that told them a bloodless victory was being won by the law-and-order forces.

Pausing, while still sheltered by the alley-gloom, Old Sobersides bluntly demanded:

"Well, sir, have you made up your mind what horn of the dilemma to take? Is it on your own hook, or can you decide to trust me?"

"Trust you? Yes! In all this world there's not another soul who either trusts in me, or believes me innocent of this foul charge!"

Montgomery's voice was husky with strong emotion, and Old Sobersides let drop his half-mocking manner, turning grave as he touched the accused with a kindly hand, then spoke:

"You're making it too black, my son. There's at least one other who will never believe you guilty, until your own lips declare it."

"One other who—who is that other, sir?" asked the young man, his voice trembling, his face betraying painfully-mingled hope and dread.

"One who has sworn to avenge the death of her half-brother, if—"

"Adella—Miss Palmer? She does not think me guilty, then?"

"If she did, I'd be forced to throw away my own convictions, and take that same line of belief, sir. But I can't—"

"Tell me just what—"

"Not here, my son," quickly interrupted the Old-Style Detective, taking another quick glance up and down the street immediately in front of their position. "This night air is mighty unhealthy, and never more so than right now."

"I reckon the mob has been scattered, safe enough, but if any of them should catch sight of you—well, that would be nasty!"

"Where can I go?"

"Will you come with me?"

"Gladly, if you'll only help clear away these horrible doubts," was the instant response.

"That's precisely my line of business, sir," said Old Sobersides, with his short, dry chuckle, moving forward once more.

CHAPTER XII.

IN SOLOMON SOBER'S DEN.

THAT portion of the street to which they had come through the dark alley was deserted, and entering upon it, Old Sobersides paused when

near the next street-lamp to turn up Montgomery's coat-collar and to slouch the brim of his soft felt hat well over his eyes.

"It's frosty enough to make that look natural," he said, with another of his characteristic chuckles, slipping a hand through the young man's arm as they moved briskly along once more. "Head up, and easy conscience, my boy! It'd take a prophet to pick you out as a runaway from jail, just now."

"'Twill profit him little to attempt my arrest, though," said Ross, with a grim smile.

It was a paltry pun, but Solomon Sober deemed it well worth another chuckle, if only because it betokened returning nerve and resolution.

But then he gravely spoke:

"It's hardly likely we'll run across any such, my son, but in case we should, give me your word of honor not to make a move without my setting you the example."

"Must I submit to arrest, then?"

"No, for I'll hinder that. If I can't do any better, I'll claim you as my own captive, and I reckon any person who is empowered to make an arrest without a warrant will know me well enough to let such a bluff pass us by."

Of course it was just as well to have a complete understanding on this point, since such a thing might come to pass, but luckily Old Sobersides was spared the necessity of stretching his conscience. Although they met several persons on their way, not a word was spoken to them, nor did anything happen to give them an additional uneasy thought.

Drawing near the house in which he lived, together with his sister, Hannah, the detective showed a greater degree of caution, yet without altering his movements sufficiently to call forth curiosity in case any eyes should be turned their way.

So far as he could see, the quiet, retired street was entirely deserted, save for themselves, and giving a peculiar rap at the front door, they were admitted by a woman remarkably like himself, in size and general build, as well as in facial features.

"All's right, Hannah," he said, quietly, as the door closed behind them. "I'm not to be disturbed, save on particular business."

Hannah Sober made no reply, but her brother evidently deemed he had said sufficient, for, touching Montgomery on an arm, as a hint to follow, he led the way up-stairs, coming to a pause just over the threshold of a dimly-lighted room.

"Come in, my son. Here's my particular den, and I don't know another guest I'd rather welcome here than your father's boy!"

"You knew him; my father, sir?" asked Montgomery, entering, while the detective silently closed the door behind him.

"And proud to call him my very good friend, too, sir," declared the detective, bustling about like one on hospitality bent.

He drew a dingy but comfortable chair closer to the little table which stood in the center of the room, turned the oil-lamp a bit higher, then crossed over to a recess in the wall, from behind the door of which he brought forth a decanter of wine, and a box of cigars.

Montgomery turned his face away, with a gesture of aversion as the veteran poured forth a glass of wine, but Old Sobersides would take no refusal.

"You need it, as a healthy bracer, my son, for there's heaps of hard work lying before us both. Down it, and— That's hearty!"

Rather than waste time in disputing, Montgomery drained the glass, and then took a cigar from the box which his host offered. The weed was particularly welcome, since he had not tasted one since his arrest.

"I keep them for such friends as drop in, at odd spells," said Old Sobersides, filling a dingy clay pipe for his own use. "As for me, I'd not give one cent a thousand for the weeds."

His pipe well lighted, Solomon brought forth a dark bottle and squat tumbler, giving a dry chuckle as he poured forth a goodly dram.

"I'm often called the Old-Style Detective, son, and it's only fair if I stick to the old-fashioned ways. The newer generation can have their cigars and their wines, but me—pipe and rum fits my taste better!"

Yet his enthusiasm seemed misplaced, for he barely touched his lips to the liquor, and his pipe went out soon after.

Montgomery shrewdly fancied that all this ceremony, off-hand though it appeared, was intended as a test of his nerves, and for that reason alone he smothered his real impatience until the veteran seemed content with the test. Then he spoke, earnestly:

"You spoke of this Miss Palmer, back yonder, sir; please tell me of her."

He was afraid to say more, just then, for he felt agitation coming to disturb his voice. He had seen enough of this peculiar being to feel sure he would neither submit to driving or to coaxing, against his own will. And even striving to dim the eagerness which lighted up his dark eyes, Montgomery waited for an answer.

That was not immediate. After one keen glance into that face, so pale when he brushed from Austin Bainbridge's face were not, the de-

tective lowered his eyes, seemingly debating in his mind just what, or just how much, to utter.

This test, too, was passed through with by the young man, in a manner to completely satisfy his critical host, who bluntly broke forth with:

"You'll do, son! It's a bit different from your father's nerve, but it is just as good in its own way. Now—what do you wish to know, first?"

"She—Miss Palmer—"

"Your sweetheart, man!"

"The lady I love, then! How does she bear this—this heavy blow?"

"Far better than I expected, God bless her mother's daughter!" Old Sobersides said, his voice husky through sudden emotion, his lids winking rapidly, as though the smoke troubled them sorely.

"You knew her mother, then, sir?"

"Ay, I knew her mother, and knew her well. Knew her when she was but a weenty bit of a school-girl. Knew her when she turned from child to woman, from maiden to wife, from wife to widow, and then—yes, I knew her mother, son!"

Old Sobersides looked his title just then. He caught up his glass and drained off its contents, then busied himself with striking a match to light his extinguished pipe once more.

Montgomery felt a thrill of passing interest, which would have been far stronger had his own affairs seemed less absorbing. It was a dim glimpse at a past and buried romance, where a strong man had loved and lost, yet whose love was still alive, though its prime object had long since turned back to dust.

It was rarely that Old Sobersides let another even glance into his heart, and now that he had given way to weakness, even momentarily, he both looked and felt ashamed of his sentimentality.

He started to laugh it off, but Montgomery reached across the little table to press his hand, and the grave honest eyes once more grew dim.

"You begin to see what I've kept buried for more years than you can number, Montgomery," the detective said, gravely, as he returned that pressure. "I couldn't have given way so far, only I knew her child loves you as I once hoped—that's enough!"

He brushed a hand almost fiercely across his face, and when Montgomery could see it again, naught save the habitual gravity, almost stolidity, remained in sight.

"You've seen what no other living man has seen, and after this night passes by, even you shall never see it again," he said, quietly. "I'm not so sorry, though. Now you'll understand why I'm feeling such a powerful interest in this affair of yours."

"Della is her daughter. You love the child, and she loves you. Am I not right?"

"As to my love for her, yes. Up to—to that time—I could say as much for Adella, with truth, I hope. But—"

"If you could say it then, why not now, son?"

"I haven't seen her, nor had so much as a word from her, sir!"

"You would have both seen and heard, only for my advice to the contrary, though," quietly observed the detective. "Don't flush up and show a grudge, son, for in all I've done, I've acted for what I deemed your best interests, as well as Della's."

"You asked for news, now let me give it, please! As I said, 'twas a powerful shock to the little woman, but she comes of royal stock: she's like her mother, and like her father, too! I hated him, once, but that's all past and gone. He was a good man, and made her a better husband than an old fool whom I might name, if I cared to try."

"I sympathize with you, sir."

"Thanks, but I'm not hunting for sympathy," with a return of his customarily dry, stolid manner. "And if you keep on putting in your oar after this fashion, the night'll wear away, and we'll be just where we started."

"I'll listen, gladly, sir, if you'll tell me about Adella."

"It's a bargain, since that's a main part of my reasons for fetching you here to my den. Well, then, it was a terrible shock to the poor child, though how she could love that—ahem!—Bainbridge, so tenderly, is past my powers of comprehension."

"Still, when I sent in my name, the next day, she rallied and insisted on having me up to her chamber. No, there's no occasion for you to fly off the handle, son," rightly interpreting that gasping breath and paling face. "She is all right, now, so far as bodily health is concerned. And when we bring the whole truth to light—as, please kind Heaven we will!—she'll be all herself again."

"Never mind all we said to each other, son. Remember, I knew her parents well, and have always been welcome at the Palmer Place. And in her sore trouble, lacking a better, the little lady took me gladly as her confidant and adviser."

"It's quite enough for now, that Adella seemed to have but a single wish: to clear up the mystery surrounding the killing of her half-

brother, so-called. She placed her entire fortune at my disposal, only asking that I employ it without stint, to bring the real criminal to the bar of justice."

Ross Montgomery was very pale, and his tones quivered huskily as he slowly spoke:

"Miss Palmer surely did not believe I would stain my hands with the blood of her brother, sir?"

"I'd ought to say yes, to pay you for asking such a question," almost harshly declared the detective, frowning blackly. "She told me how and where her heart had gone. She concealed nothing at all. Yet—out up in ye, man! Could her mother's child love a dog?"

"And you told her— How can I thank you, dear sir?"

Ross Montgomery would have caught those strong hands in his own, but Old Sobersides drew abruptly back, still frowning.

"Stop, sir. That's quite another matter. She reasoned like a girl in love, but I—well, I looked at the naked facts, and this is what I saw: Two ugly quarrels betwixt you fellows, not to mention all that had gone before.

"In one, by striking first, you downed Bainbridge, but in the second you came off second-best. You drew a dirk upon him, or pulled a gun; accounts differ as to the weapon, but the bald fact remains."

"I was mad, but I never—"

"I know; it's in just such mad fits that two-thirds of our tragedies take place, and in fully one-half of them that the hangman's rope is knotted by the hands of the one whose neck it is fated to fit!"

Montgomery shivered, bowed his head upon his arms as they rested on the table. Old Sobersides paused a moment, but then coldly added:

"You were bounced, of course, but as you left, you swore to play even if it cost your own life. Then—Bainbridge was killed. Two witnesses made solemn oath that they saw you kill the man."

"Now, taking it all in a bunch, can you wonder that I was hardly ready to chime in with the girl, when she declared her belief in your innocence?"

Before Montgomery could make reply, a tiny gong sounded from the side of the room, and rising abruptly to his feet, Sober said:

"That says the police are at my door, though I can hardly see how they managed to track you down so soon!"

CHAPTER XIII.

ALL'S FAIR IN WAR.

ROSS MONTGOMERY sprang to his feet with a low sound, more growl than cry, flashing a glance around the room in search of a better weapon, even while his hands closed upon the back of his chair.

"They can't take me alive!" he said, in husky but fierce tones. "I'll never go back until I've cleared myself in her eyes!"

"I don't mean you shall, son," coolly spoke the detective, his eyes turned toward that portion of the wall from whence the hidden gong gave its note of warning.

"If you've tricked me into a trap, Sober, I'll—"

"Will you never get those eyes open, boy? I'm trying to trick your enemies, not you."

As he spoke, the hidden monitor gave two sounds, then another, after a slight interval.

Old Sobersides nodded his head, emphatically, and a relieved expression showed upon his face as he turned it toward the young man.

"Better than it might have proved, but—look here, my son: I'll prove myself your best friend, if you'll only let me do it."

"I'll never submit to arrest."

"Am I asking you to submit to anything of the sort? Don't cut away the ground from under your own feet, man! If you won't—but I've got to answer that call, else he'll find fresh grounds for suspecting us."

Stepping quickly across the room, Old Sobersides caught hold of a rusty nail which protruded from the bare wall, giving it a slight pull or a gentle push, Montgomery could not be sure just which. Then the Old-Style Detective faced him once more, speaking rapidly:

"It's the chief of police, asking for me, and I've told Hannah to show him right up here, so—quiet, boy!"

"You say it's no trap, yet—"

"Of all the obstinate donkeys I ever saw, you're the worst! Will you never give me credit for being your friend, son? Can't you see that I'm working for your own good, and that I'm giving you proof enough to sink a steamboat?"

Stepping quickly across the room, Old Sobersides pressed a spring which caused a door to start ajar, just where Montgomery would never have thought of looking for such an article.

"In with you, son," whispered Sober, almost forcing the runaway into this dark opening. "Listen to all we say, if you like, but don't open your head for so much as a chirp, unless you're really anxious to put us both behind the bars!"

All this was performed with such rapidity that Ross Montgomery had no time in which to

object or resist, and as the secret door closed upon him, he found himself in a dark, yet well ventilated closet, with tiny apertures directly in front of his face, through which the lamplight dimly came, and out of which he could peer, commanding every portion of the office, beyond a certain angle.

With wonderful celerity for a man of his build and seeming clumsiness, Solomon Sober removed all signs of his having had a companion in his den, leaving but tobacco and rum upon the little table, and a single chair drawn near, as though he had been lazily taking his comfort and rest combined.

By this time the sound of steps were heard upon the stairs, and the detective had barely time left to sink loungingly into that comfortable seat, before a sharp rap sounded at his door, which immediately swung open, to reveal Hannah Sober, and, just beyond her heavy figure, the form of Octavius Zouche, chief of police.

Like one roused from a half-doze, Old Sobersides started from his chair, just as Hannah spoke:

"Gentleman to see you, brother Solomon."

"En?" with a quick dash of a hand across his eyes. "Oh! It's you, sir? Come in, won't you, please? I never thought— Nothing wrong, I'm hoping, chief?"

There was no excuse for confusing the identity of his visitor, for almost before Hannah Sober finished her curt speech of introduction, Zouche pressed by her, into the room, around which his keen gaze swept eagerly, only to change to an expression of disappointment.

"Where is he? What have you done with him, Sober?"

"You needn't wait, Hannah. If I want anything more, I'll call for it," said Sober, nodding toward his sister.

She gave an inarticulate grunt, then closed the door with a little slam, heavily descending the stairs beyond.

Not until then did the detective give anything like an answer to the questions so impatiently put by his chief, and previous scant information those answers offered, too!

"Which, and whom, sir? I heard what you said, but blessed if I know what you meant."

"Oh, come, Sober!" with an impatient frown, glancing around that cozy den as though searching for a possible hiding-place. "You surely must know what I mean: where's Ross Montgomery?"

Old Sobersides gave a barely perceptible start, a stronger interest showing in his grave face, but his answer was instant:

"Where is he? In the jail, of course!"

Zouche turned from his inspection of the room, to squarely face the detective, gazing sternly, half-suspiciously into those calm, grave eyes as he spoke sharply:

"What sort of deal are you trying to give me, Sober? Don't you know he isn't at the jail?"

"You've shifted his quarters, then, sir?" innocently inquired the detective.

"Didn't you help in that shifting, old friend?"

Old Sobersides looked puzzled, trying to read the truth in those magnetic eyes before him. If he succeeded, that was better fortune than rewarded the efforts of the chief.

It was clear enough that he had heard of the attack upon the jail, and the mysterious disappearance of Ross Montgomery, though that fact had come to light much earlier than Old Sobersides had calculated upon.

It was just as plain, too, that Zouche had come hither, fully expecting to find the escaped prisoner in charge. Failing in that, more or less strong suspicions had sprung up in his mind as to the perfect good faith of the Old-Style Detective.

All this Solomon Sober read during that brief gaze, but the knowledge thus gained did not trouble him in the least, or prevent his adding a flat lie to his other sins.

"If any such shifting has taken place, sir, I don't know it. I've been right here in my den taking it easy all the evening."

"Then you haven't heard—curse the luck, anyway!"

With a gesture of angry disgust Zouche dropped into a chair, removing his hat with which to fan his heated brow.

Old Sobersides quickly poured out a glass of wine, offering it to his superior in office. Zouche took it, swallowed the wine at a gulp, then drew a long breath before saying:

"There's been an attack made on the jail, Sober, and Ross Montgomery is missing."

Then Old Sobersides belied his title, betraying strong excitement and using still stronger words as he asked and received a brief account of the affair.

"I supposed of course you were mixed up in it all," added Chief Zouche, hitching his chair nearer the table, then pouring himself another glass of wine. "You were the first to hint that such an attempt might be made, and Captain Thornton—he led the cavalry, you understand?"

"Since you say so, yes."

"He told me you gave him pretty much the same warning. And so, well, when it proved Montgomery wasn't in jail, I jumped to the conclusion that you had taken him in charge. And

it's mighty hard work to crowd that same notion out of my brain, too, don't you know?"

"Will it help any, if I offer to take oath that I haven't seen or spoken to Montgomery since you took me to his cell, sir?" gravely asked Old Sobersides.

"Of course that settles it, Sober, but what could have become of the fellow? Surely he couldn't have escaped, during the confusion?"

"Not without help, of course, sir."

Chief Zouche broke forth into a most emphatic storm of curses, and at each one, Old Sobersides nodded his head in grave approbation. It seemed to do him quite as much good as it did the chief, and his labor certainly was much light-r.

"It's the devil's own luck, and money can't begin to pay for it!" fumed Zouche, emptying another glass of the wine.

"Was so much damage done, then? Or, were so many of the prisoners turned loose?"

"Neither one nor the other, but what excuse can I offer, if Montgomery isn't on hand when wanted? You know how many kickers there are, already, Sober, and how gladly they'll jump at an opening like this: if I hadn't been so infernally smart!"

"You acted for the best, I'm sure, sir, in sending Montgomery to the jail instead of putting him through the regular routine."

"Of course I did, but who's going to credit me with good intentions, when they've panned out all for the worst? I'd give a cool thousand out of my own pocket to know just how and just where that rascal has gone!"

"It's not so difficult to make a pretty close guess at both, sir," gravely said the detective.

"Yet you said—"

"That I took neither part nor lot in the affair; just so," bowed Solomon. "Still, I know this much: it's not the work of those who feel true friendship for Ross Montgomery, chief. If they attacked the jail on his account, 'twas to kill, not to save."

"They were inside long enough to do a dozen killings. If they really meant lynching, as Ernest says they talked of, where's the body? Not in or anywhere near the jail, be sure!"

"If they didn't leave that behind, the next we'll hear or see of it, will be at the morgue. I'll pledge my credit as a detective, sir, that Montgomery never left the jail of his own free will. If he is gone, as you say, then the mob took him away."

"I'd rather believe they were working for, not against him, Sober."

"So would I, for if that was true, we'd stand a fair chance to get him back in limbo once more."

"You say this, yet you've all along stood up for his innocence?"

"Because I believed in it, sir," was the earnest reply. "I knew his father, and I knew his grandfather as well. The whole world knows what a clean record the Montgomery family have made for themselves. Is it at all likely a son of such fathers would do so foul a deed?"

"Not in cold blood, of course, but he'd been thrashed before a crowd who knew them both. And, too, he threatened to play even though it cost him his own life."

"Just as you or I might have done under the same circumstances, sir, yet neither of us would be likely to follow it up with murder."

That seemed something like carrying war into Africa, and Chief Zouche rose from his chair, saying almost curtly:

"Well, each to his own opinion, Sober. If Montgomery has croaked, he's past helping by any of us, but if he's still in the land of the living, he'll have to play the rest of his cards mighty shrewdly, or I'll have him in hand before he can fairly realize his freedom."

"If living, we'll bring him to light, of course," quietly said the detective, opening the door toward which his superior officer had turned, as though ready to take his departure.

Passing from the room, down the stairs, which were dimly lighted by a small hall-lamp, Solomon Sober paused before the outer door, lowering his voice to say:

"Of course I'll try to get at the bottom facts, sir, but don't you think the matter had better be smoothed over as much as possible?"

"How can it, man?"

"As far as the disappearance of Montgomery goes, I meant. If he has really escaped, either of his own accord during the confusion, or through being helped away by friends, publishing broadcast the facts couldn't help us recover him. The less stir made, at least for a short time, the better will be our chances for catching either him or those who have made away with the poor fellow. Don't you think so, sir?"

"I hardly know what to think, but I'll bear it in mind. And you?"

"I'll bring you reliable news inside of twenty-four hours, sir," was the prompt response.

CHAPTER XIV.

OLD SOBERSIDES'S PLEDGE.

"BRING me him, and I'll pay you your own price, Sober," earnestly declared the chief of police, as the detective opened the door.

"If he's still in the land of the living, sir, I'll

fetch him, or news of his hiding, inside of that time."

"If you need any help—"

"Of course I'll know where to apply for it, sir."

With a hearty hand-clasp, the two men parted, Solomon Sober looking after that erect, portly figure, until it was lost in the shadows of night, then closing and barring the door.

As he turned away toward the stairs, Hannah Sober put in an appearance, saying nothing, but with a look of inquiry upon her strong face.

"It's all right, Hannah. The chief knows just as much as I saw fit to tell him. You did right in holding him here until you could hear from me. Of course he suspected nothing?"

"How could he, Solomon?"

"That's so," with one of his dry chuckles. "It's a great scheme, isn't it? Well, it's hardly likely there'll be any more callers, but if such should come, remember that I'm away for the night."

Hannah nodded her understanding, and Old Sobersides passed up the stairs to his private den, shutting the door behind him, then crossing over to press the hidden spring by means of which that cunningly contrived recess was exposed.

"Sorry I had to keep you waiting, son," Sober said, as he drew the door open, to permit Montgomery to emerge from his place of concealment. "The chief was in a terrible stew, and it took time to cool him off. Still, your time wasn't entirely wasted, I'm hoping?"

The bland smile covered a bit of sarcasm, but Montgomery did not feel the sting. His hands were clasping one of his friend's, pressing them warmly, and his voice was a little unsteady by emotion as he spoke.

"I was worse than an idiot for doubting you, Mr. Sober, but now I'm ready to trust you without further question. That is, if you can trust me, in turn, of course."

Their hands joined firmly, and Sober spoke earnestly:

"Spoken like your father's son, sir! If I prove false to that trust, may I lack a true friend in my own time of need. I'll clear away this ugly cloud, or I'll never again try my hand at detective work."

More elaborate words might have been chosen, perhaps, but Ross Montgomery was satisfied. He was looking into those honest eyes, and they spoke far more eloquently. Eyes and hand-clasp turned that promise into a sacred pledge, which only death could leave unfulfilled.

Old Sobersides only relaxed his cordial grasp when he had placed Ross Montgomery in the chair so recently vacated by Chief Zouche. Then he replaced wine and cigars on the table, lighting his old pipe like one bent on making a night of it.

Mindful of his recently expressed trust, Montgomery offered no objections to this, but his eyes carried an anxious light which one so keen-witted as the Old-Style Detective could hardly mistake.

"I know pretty well what you're thinking, son," he said, through a cloud of blue smoke. "You're all for work, hoping to upset the world by one mighty heave and toss, of course. I don't blame you, for I've seen the time when my blood leaped just as hotly."

"Think what it must be, sir, to live with such a foul charge hanging over your head! And, maybe, even the ones you love the best, holding you as guilty! That's what cuts deepest, sir!"

"If you mean the little lady, by that, son, rest easy. She wouldn't hear to your guilt from the first, and though I might have worn my tongue down to a stump arguing against you to her, it—"

"You believed it, no doubt, but you wronged me, most bitterly, sir."

Old Sobersides gave one of his driest chuckles, then said:

"Of course, I believed no such thing, my boy."

"But you said—"

"Well, since you must have heard pretty much all that passed between the chief and me, from the closet, yonder, is it so difficult to realize that I'm a pretty tolerable liar?"

Montgomery was puzzled, and his face showed as much.

"Well, let that point pass, son. At all events, I'm telling you the sober truth right now. I was only testing your nerve, before; with, maybe, a bit of stray spite against the stubborn fellow who so openly doubted my wish to serve him, if only on his dead father's account."

"And Adella—you failed to convince her of my guilt, then?"

"I never tried. I told her, what I tell you now, that I'd just as soon believe I killed Austin Bainbridge, as to think you'd done him in such a cowardly fashion."

Ross Montgomery impulsively leaned across the little table to join hands with the detective. He said nothing, for his throat was choked up, just then, but his face and eyes, and fervent grasp were amply sufficient.

When their hands parted grip, Old Sobersides spoke earnestly:

"Time enough later on to talk sentiment, son,

Just now, we want to get down to sober business."

"One word, first, please. Adella—she would have sent me a cheering word?"

"A thousand, and brought them herself, if I hadn't held firm. For one thing, we wanted to keep your place of confinement secret, and if my belief was well founded, there'd be close watch kept over her movements. If she was to visit the jail, who could she be calling on, but you?"

"Then you think it is all a plot against me, sir?"

"Against you as one serious obstacle, yes. But I believe still more firmly that the main object of it all may be found in the fortune which was left in equal parts to Adella and Bainbridge."

Montgomery gave a start, turning very pale as he took in the full meaning of that grave speech.

"Then Adella—guard her, man! Never waste a thought on me, but guard her from danger such— God! if I could only be free to act!"

The lover dropped his head upon the arms which crossed on the table, a shivering fit shaking his body from crown to sole.

A look of sympathy came into the detective's face, and he hastened to relieve those terrible fears, as far as lay in his power.

"I've already taken what precautions I could, Montgomery, and I hardly think any serious danger can come near the girl before we can bring the dirty whelps to full accounting. If you'll only help, in place of hindering me—"

"Tell me what to do, and I'll do it gladly, sir," said the young man, lifting his head, forcing an outward composure, though his haggard face told how deeply this fresh trouble was affecting his mind.

"Even if you can't see precisely what I am driving at, son?"

"So long as you assure me 'tis for her good, yes," came the instant reply.

"Good enough! And now, as a starter, tell me your side of this quarrel with Bainbridge, please."

Montgomery flushed hotly, then paled again. It was by no means an easy task, but he faced it without further flinching.

"You know I'm from North Carolina, of course. I couldn't bear to take up arms against the old flag, nor yet fight against my own people, my own State. I don't think I'm a coward, out—"

"I never knew a Montgomery who was one, and I know your father's son surely couldn't carry the white feather."

"Thank you. But that was at the bottom of it all. Bainbridge took it as a pretext, I reckon, when he found I was courting Adella. Times without number he has taunted me with running away from Carolina, simply because I was too cowardly to fight for my convictions."

"I submitted to all this, mainly on Adella's account. She begged me not to quarrel with her brother, for that would build up a serious barrier between us two. I promised, and a thousand times since that pledge was given, I've cursed myself for yielding so far!"

"I reckon 'twould have been better still had you kept to that pledge yet a little longer, though," dryly said Sober.

"I know what you mean, but what could I do? Bainbridge insulted me past human endurance, and I was absolutely forced to strike him. He hinted—he almost called me a nigger!"

Montgomery choked, and was forced to pause for a space. Then, with an evident effort, he told what had passed at the table in the Planter's Hotel dining-room.

"You had to do it, of course," said Sober, reluctantly, after hearing all. "Still, it's mighty unlucky, coupled with all that followed. He renewed the row, at the other place?"

"Yes. I tried to defend myself, but he was too heavy for me. I may have threatened to play even, as they say, but if so, I surely did not mean more than meeting Bainbridge in a fair, regular duel."

"And yet, as the night air gradually cooled me off, I hated the bare thought of such a meeting. Not, mind you, because I'm a coward; I believe I could stand up before a loaded pistol with as much nerve as another man; but when I thought of how such a meeting would affect Adella, no matter which way it turned out, it almost drove me wild!"

"Not so much wonder, either," said Sober, his face reflecting strong sympathy. "But where did you go, after the row? If you can cover the time between—"

He broke off abruptly as Montgomery shook his head, gloomily.

"You are thinking of an *alibi*, but that is out of the question. I only wanted to be alone, so I could think it all out, and after the row, I neither spoke to nor was spoken to by a living person, until I was arrested at my chamber."

"Where did you go? How did you pass all those hours?"

"I hardly knew where I was going, but somehow I came to my wits down at the levee. It was then long past midnight, and I met no one I knew, or could even describe with distinct-

ness, while going from the river front to my lodgings."

"Not one? Try to think, son."

"I have thought, and it's no use. So you see an *alibi* is entirely out of the question."

Old Sobersides gave one of his peculiar, mirthless chuckles at this despondent speech, then coolly said:

"Well, lacking the genuine article, I reckon we'll have to manufacture one out of whole cloth, if it comes down to that. While I hardly make a practice of lying, as a general thing, I can take a turn at it on occasion, when necessity compels."

"We'll meet lie with lie, if we have to, son. I began with the chief, a bit ago, and I can keep it up with more dangerous enemies than he'll ever prove to our side."

"He believes me guilty, though."

"Of course, and so might I, only for my knowledge of the breed you come from. Then, too, a girl like Adella Palmer could never give her pure heart's love to a cur of an assassin! That isn't logic, perhaps, but it's mighty good human sense, and I'll swear to so much!"

Once more a grateful hand clasped his, then Montgomery asked how the detective chanced so opportunely at the rear door of the jail, that night.

"There was no chance about it, son," bluntly answered the other. "I knew the gang was thinking to get at you—I warned the chief and the soldiers, both, ten good hours beforehand, but neither seemed to put much trust in what I had to say."

"How did you find out their plans?"

"I'll tell you that, later, son. One thing at a time, is a mighty good motto to keep in view. And so—I knew they were at work in front, even before I set to work at the rear door. I was trying to pick the lock, but before I could do that, it opened, and you plumped right into my willing arms!"

"And came near jumping out of them, through pure fright, too!"

"I know. I'd have given you warning, but I was afraid of scaring Flighty Fan, and so—but that doesn't matter now."

"The main point is this: you've broken jail, and as Flighty Fan will never tell what part she played, the secret is good as our own. You've disappeared, just as much as though you'd left the world for good and all. If any clew could be found at the jail, be sure Zouche wouldn't have shown so much chagrin while here."

"Now, to boil it down, Ross Montgomery must never come to life again, or show up as Ross Montgomery, until the hangman's noose is fairly fastened about the neck of Austin Bainbridge's slayer!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE BROTHERS OF BULLET AND STEEL.

As already shown, the attack on the city jail was made for the express purpose of gaining full possession of Ross Montgomery, and what would have followed then, can readily be inferred by the words let drop by the leader while he was striving to open Cell 28.

Thanks to Flighty Fan, that bold attack failed of its first aim, and as the alarm was passed that the cavalry under lead of Captain Thornton was coming to the assistance of the police, that attack turned to a hurried scamper for darkness and safety.

A few arrests were made, but, almost as a matter of course, the leading spirits in that bold outrage effected their escape.

Some at least of the foiled lynchers never stopped running until safely within the limits of The Patch, and to one of those, who evidently owned a less nimble pair of legs than others, Dolly Varden gave a whispered word or two, which told him a meeting had been called at the usual place.

To still others the flashily arrayed proprietor vouchsafed the same information, and each man thus notified, watching his chance and timing his movements accordingly, vanished from the saloon itself, yet without passing through the street door, as ordinary mortals were wont to do.

The rendezvous was located somewhere not far from Dolly Varden's, although it would have puzzled the uninitiated, sorely enough to locate the spot more definitely.

The smoke of rank tobacco, from ranker pipes or base imitation of cigars, filled the air mingling with the odors of sour beer and inferior whisky. Tallow candles afforded the only method of illumination, and they only lessened the gloom which habitually reigned in this, apparently if not actually, underground apartment.

Nearly a dozen rough-clad fellows had gathered there, before the man who led in the attack upon the jail put in an appearance.

He had removed his uniform, which helped so materially in deceiving the city jailer, and substituted for it a suit of coarse, fairly respectable looking clothes.

The necessity for making this change no doubt accounted for the tardiness of their chief, but none of his followers cared to question him, just then. He seemed nearly out of breath, as

though he had been given a hard race for his freedom, or else had hurried himself far more than usual, through a dislike to keep them waiting.

There was little in the way of furniture within those four walls.

The leader took a seat in an ordinary wooden-bottomed chair at one end of the room, a small, unpainted stand in front of him as he sat.

Here and there were empty kegs, a barrel or two, with a few boxes which might be utilized as seats or tables, according to the needs of the occasion.

The floor seemed to be of hard-beaten dirt, or possibly cement, with an ancient layer of trampled mud over its surface. The four walls were of uncut stone, rudely laid in mortar, broken only by several narrow doors of heavily nailed and spiked planks.

The low ceiling was of heavy planks, stained by water and dust, marked here and there by moldy patches, all made darker by the accumulation of smoke from candles or tobacco.

It was anything but a pleasant place of meeting, yet it corresponded well with the class of men who frequented it, if those over whose faces the chief was now glancing might be taken as a fair sample.

There was no attempt at disguise on their part, and not a face of them all but what was known in police circles, or could be found represented in more than one Rogues' Gallery.

Although none of the men there assembled showed signs of either curiosity or wonder, it is not quite so certain that he who called himself their leader, was as willing to show his undisguised face.

He wore a huge beard of grizzled red, so thickly planted as to permit little more than a glimpse of his nose and a little patch of skin beneath his eyes. A pair of smoked-glass spectacles masked his eyes, and a soft felt hat was pulled well down over his forehead.

If he was not disguised, then the simple use of shears and a razor could so alter his personality that his own mother would not have found it an easy task to recognize her hopeful son.

Rapping sharply upon the stand before him, this worthy rose to his feet, once more glancing slowly over those present.

Instantly all was silent, the subdued talking at an end, and each member looking expectantly toward their leader.

"Brothers! We'll dispense with the regular routine to-night. Give the sign and the word!"

As one man the entire gathering obeyed. Each right hand swung upward a pistol, each left hand gripped the hilt of knife or dirk, the bared blades glittering as they rose, then sunk. And as a single voice, came the low but stern words:

"By bullet and steel!"

"It is well, brothers. And now, by virtue of the powers vested in me by one who is chief over all, I absolve you from the rest of the opening ceremony, and hereby declare this lodge ready for the transaction of such business as may properly be brought before it."

Another brief pause followed this set phrase, then the chief spoke in sharper, quicker tones:

"There's no need in wasting time and breath, boys. You all know how completely we've failed to do the job we undertook this night."

"Sure, thin, sor, it's t'ree av the b'yes that's knowin' av that same, annyhow, sor!" broke forth a son of the Emerald Isle.

"Those who were taken by the police, you mean, Denny?"

"Yis, be gobs! An' wan o' thim's me own twin, bad luck to it ahl!"

"He took his chances, the same as the rest of us, Denny, but no harm shall come to him through obeying orders. If he isn't turned loose by the cops to-night, I'll see to his liberty in the morning."

"Av they don't run him in on the owld charge, sor?"

"Old or new, he shall have his full liberty. For what else are we banded together?"

"Av ye pass the word, sor, Oi'm satisfied, faith!"

"You have it, brother. Now—cursing can't help what's gone wrong, of course, or I'd be lifting the roof from over our heads! It seemed such a sure thing, once we had that devil fairly located! Now—well, we've got it all to do over again, with the serious disadvantage of knowing the enemy has caught a fair glimpse of our hand."

"You know what word was given: to find, and to silence, by bullet or steel! It was enough for you to know that the good of the Order demanded sharp measures and instant action. You tried, and failed."

"I'm not blaming you, brothers. I led you, and you followed my orders to the very letter. If you are at fault, I am even worse. But when the whole report reaches the head center, I think he will absolve us."

"Now, using the discretion granted me, I'll tell you just how much depended upon success, this night. Then you will see how urgent is the necessity for finding and silencing our man, Ross Montgomery."

"Of course you all know how Austin Bainbridge came by his death, but I imagine

there are few among your number who were aware how closely that gentleman was connected with our Order.

"He never attended our meetings here, because he belongs to the next degree. He was high in favor with our great leaders, and was almost implicitly trusted by them, with papers which, in wrong hands, may prove our ruin, both as an Order, and as individual members."

A startled murmur ran through the assembly, but a single gesture checked that sound, and the chief resumed:

"Word has come to me, through the regular channels, that at the time of his death, Austin Bainbridge had in his possession papers of the most vital importance, commanding me to recover them, no matter at what cost, either of money, time or personal risk."

"No such papers were found upon the body, for I took particular pains to make sure of so much: if either the police, or the coroner, had made such an important discovery, I must have learned of it."

"The documents are not to be found at his residence out on the Carondelet Road, nor are they at his rooms here in town. It is known he had them in his immediate possession only the night before his death. Then—the man who took his life, also took his papers!"

Again that ominous murmur, and again it was checked by a single gesture.

"Ross Montgomery certainly killed Austin Bainbridge. Two of our sworn brothers were witnesses of that killing, and while they might testify falsely to others, they would never dare give me a lie, coming as I did, with the sign and the grip."

"Both Nipper Noll and Nosey Clark declare that Montgomery ran off the instant his victim fell to his pistol, but they also ran away, and the rascal must have returned to rifle the body of those papers while our brothers were hunting up a cop."

"All this has taken a good bit of time and breath, brethren, but the case is sufficiently grave to fully justify all that. You are all as deeply interested as I am, and I know that unless we can recover those papers before they are passed over to the police, only swift and long flight can save our necks!"

"This much I know, and I suspect much more: for if Ross Montgomery was ever confined in the jail, as I was well informed, he was assisted by our deadliest, most dangerous enemy, and mainly because of those incriminating documents!"

"You all know whom I mean: Solomon Sober, the bloodhound!"

Then that long pent-up growl fairly broke forth, and for a full minute the chief was powerless to still the low but vicious outbreak.

It was a gathering of human wolves, hyenas, tigers, so far as vicious passions went; and strong man though he was, had Old Sobersides been placed in their midst just then he would have been torn to pieces.

Finally the leader succeeded in gaining control, and in low, hard tones he asked:

"You can growl, but are you ready to act? You show your teeth, but are you ready to flesh them? Speak, brothers!"

The answer came as one man's voice: they were more than ready, but where should they strike first?

"At the head which carries the worst poison, of course! And that is—Listen, brothers, all!"

"Old Sobersides has openly taken up the defense of this Montgomery. I know for a fact that he almost quarreled with Chief Zouche, because he believed Montgomery did the killing."

"Now, if Montgomery holds these papers—or knows where they are, for I've learned that nothing of the sort was found on his person when the police arrested him—and Solomon Sober is backing his cause, what ought we to do?"

There was a brief silence, broken by one of the members:

"Won't the charge of murder stick, if he's brought to trial?"

"It might, if Montgomery hadn't those papers with which to buy himself off. To get hold of the secrets they contain, Zouche would swear black was white! And then—there's the only witnesses against Ross Montgomery; neither of the lads have any too much grit, and while they need only stick to the plain truth, who can be sure of their doing that, so long as the police have full control over them?"

"That's what has been biting me sharpest," said Dolly Varden, who had entered the room later than the others. "I'd feel heap sight easier in the mind o' me if they had to swear to a lie! They're so much more used to that sort o' thing, ye know!"

A muttering came from the other members, which seemed to confirm this opinion. Doubtless Pickett and Clark were valuable hands in their proper place, but hardly such as could be depended upon in a very tight pinch.

The chief glanced around the room, as though waiting to see what any one else might have to offer before declaring his own opinions more openly. One or two of the men spoke, but they did little more than to echo the sentiment let fall by Dolly Varden.

Then, as a brief silence fell, there came a signal from the door at the further end of the

room, and after bending an ear close to the barrier, the guard turned to report:

"'Nother brother outside, boss. What's the word?"

"Make sure he's all right, then admit him, of course."

The heavy door swung open, and a wiry-built fellow dashed hastily into the room, his first words creating a genuine sensation.

CHAPTER XVI.

STRIKING A HOT SCENT.

"I've got him holed, boss!"

The new-comer was none other than "Billy the Banker," to see whom Old Sobersides had paid a visit to Dolly Varden's, in The Patch, on the evening which was marked by the killing of Austin Bainbridge.

The fellow was strongly excited, as his haste, no less than his disordered attire made clear, for, as a rule, Billy the Banker was almost languidly deliberate in his movements, and painfully precise in his personal appearance.

For a single breath after his declaration, all was silent within that rude apartment, but then, as they divined his full meaning, each man present gave vent to fierce delight, after his own individual fashion, making a hubbub which caused Dolly Varden to scowl savagely as he cast an apprehensive glance in the direction of his saloon.

"Quiet, ye divils!" he snarlingly cried, grasping a couple of those nearest him, shaking them, and then cracking their heads together with more force than kindness. "D've want to have the bloody cops down upon us, that ye—Quiet, I say! Or I'll give ye something better to nowl about!"

His attempts to restore order were ably seconded by their chief, and quiet was quickly restored, though nearly every face betrayed the strongest interest in the tidings Billy the Banker had surely brought.

"What do you mean, William Barnes?" asked the leader, harshly. "Who is it you've run to his hole, sir?"

"Ross Montgomery, no less!" promptly came the reply.

The heavily-bearded man started back like one who has just received a blow, but he as quickly rallied, lifting a clinched hand to still the sound which broke involuntarily from the eager gang.

"Silence, all! I'll inflict full penalty upon the brother who makes a sound or utters another word without being called upon to speak. Now deliver your report, Brother Barnes. Not to me, but to the family in general. Come this way, please."

A gratified smile came into the face of the then center of interest as he accepted this unusual honor, and as he turned to face the eager assembly, he instinctively smoothed down his ruffled plumage.

Barring an air of late hours and evil appetites, Billy the Banker was not an ill-looking fellow, as none knew better than himself.

He was of good figure, rather slender, perhaps, but "all there," to make use of the vernacular.

He dressed well, spending a good deal of money on his person, and though his attire would look something odd in present-day eyes, at that time and location, the bank-sneak was a perfect mold of fashion.

"Boil it down as much as you can, Barnes," said the chief, as the other took his position. "If what you've let fall is reliable, there's more work for the family before this night is wholly spent."

"I'll reel it off, straight as a string, chief," said the crook, one hand resting lightly upon the stand, the other gracefully supported by one lapel of his coat. "I'm under oath, as it were."

"Get under way, then, can't you, sir?"

But Billy the Banker was not to be hurried out of his own gait, just then. He fully appreciated his own importance, and felt fairly confident the news he bore was sufficient to carry him through a much worse storm than the one lowering on the face of his chief.

"I wasn't with the rest of you fellows in the attack on the jail, because I had other business, as our worthy chief can vouch, gentlemen."

"I vouch for that, sir. Go on, and make haste!"

"Well, I was not so mighty far away but what I heard the racket, and hurried in that direction, hoping even then to take a hand in if necessary. But before I could get to the jail, I heard the bugles, and that told me the show was over for the night, if nothing worse."

"I stopped short, close to an alley, and was trying to decide which course I'd better take, when I caught sight of a couple of fellows coming my way."

"I didn't give that so much thought, at first, but more by chance than anything else, I kept eyes upon them as they came under the next street lamp."

"Then I recognized Old Sobersides in the bigger of the pair, and as he stopped to turn up the collar and pull down the hat of his pal, it struck me I'd hit something worth the trouble of looking into a bit deeper."

"I lay low, letting them pass me by, and as they did this, I fancied I knew the smaller man."

though it puzzled me a bit to know how that could possibly be. And so, to make dead sure, I shadowed them clear to Sober's house, and as the door opened for them, the light of a hall-lamp fell squarely upon both faces, and I distinctly recognized Ross Montgomery!"

Billy the Banker paused as though to watch the effect of his declaration, but he had already discounted it, and the brothers kept still. Doubtless they had not yet forgotten the stern warning so recently given them by their leader.

"You are dead sure, Barnes?" asked that leader, in hoarse tones.

"I'll bet my head on it, and win, sir," came the prompt reply. "I waited quiet until the door closed upon them, then studied out my best plan. Of course I knew Montgomery had given you fellows the slip, some fashion, and finally I struck back for the jail, hoping to pick up some one of the boys who could help me out."

"I found Harvey, and sent him to shadow Sober's, to trail 'em down if they left the hole before we could act. Then I ran all the way here, barely dodging the cops on two separate occasions, in my haste to report what I'd discovered."

Then the pent-up excitement broke forth, and eager excitement took full possession of the gang for a brief space.

Not until all was still again, and every eye turned his way, did the chief make sign or utter word. His head had been bowed like one in deep reflection, but now, pushing Billy the Banker aside, he resumed his customary station, speaking coldly, yet with fierce earnestness:

"We now know, what we could only suspect before: Old Sober-sides and the police are playing into each other's hands, with our destruction as their main object. I've tried to find a different solution of it all, but in vain."

"I know that Ross Montgomery was confined in the jail, although old Zouche put up a bluff at the Central, to fool the papers, if not to throw us off the real scent. I feel dead sure he was inside the jail when we made our attack, but that the cunning devils were ready to foil our plans."

"I believe Sol Sober, helped no doubt by Ernest, or his crazy hag of a sister, let Montgomery out at the rear entrance, then passed away, just as Barnes saw them, later."

"Know now, what I could only suspect before: that Montgomery has made known to the police, or, at least, to Sober, his having those damning papers where he can place his hands upon them when needed most! He's already bargaining to give them up, as the price of his safety, but— Shall we let that bargain be consummated, brethren?"

"It may be doubted whether that last query was fully caught by the persons appealed to, for they had broken into a startled chorus as the chief placed their peril so distinctly before them."

From among other cries, one strong voice arose:

"Ef that's what, the quicker we skip out, the better, I reckon!"

In answer there came a laugh: sharp, mocking, full of fierce scorn. The unexpected sound quelled that tumult as by magic, and drew all eyes toward their leader once more.

"You're a fool, John Metcalfe! Would you run away at the first sign of danger, and thus give the enemy the very proof they lack? Don't you know that you couldn't get out of town without your flight being noted? And what better proof could they ask than that very attempt to run away, man?"

No one ventured to reply, for all realized the force of this argument. Yet, though silent, each member looked anxiously to him for a better way out of the closing net.

"Run, is it? No, brethren: we'll stay here and fight it out on this line, for we can't do anything wiser. It's come to just this: we've got to kill, or be hanged! Now, which would you rather do, brethren?"

"Kill, of course, but how?" doubtfully asked Metcalfe.

"By beginning with our most dangerous enemies, of course," came the instant retort. "We'll begin with Old Sober-sides and Ross Montgomery, and if that cunning devil hasn't played another double on us—"

"Harvey wouldn't let 'em give him the shake, chief."

"Not if any man could hinder it, I know, Billy. But, after all, he's only one man, and Sol Sober is a round dozen—curse him!"

Right heartily was that curse responded to by the Brothers of Bullet and Steel. There was precious little love for the Old-Style Detective felt in that evil gang, be sure.

"We're ready to help do the job up brown, boss," said Metcalfe, who seemed anxious to remove the evil impression given by his first involuntary display of cowardice. "But how kin we git at it, though?"

"I've got an idea which I'll elaborate in time, but our first move must be to make sure our game is still in its den. You'll come with me, Barnes, and you, Metcalfe. We'll go direct to Sober's house, and see what Harvey has to report."

"You, Varden, must stick to your bar. In

case any of the cops should pay a visit, throw them off the scent as best you can."

"I'll fool 'em, boss, or never show my face in The Patch again," was the saloon-keeper's prompt response.

"Good! You can fill their eyes with dust, if any man can. As for the rest of you, follow after us, but scatter and close in from all sides, centering at Sober's house. If noticed, play shy. If you don't see or hear from us before, lay low a square off from his den until one of us passes the word along. You understand?"

Satisfied that his instructions were perfectly comprehended, and would be faithfully carried out, the chief led his two chosen aides through one of the narrow doors, thus leaving the rendezvous without being obliged to pass out through Varden's saloon.

Once fairly under the stars, the chief hastily gave the two crooks other instructions, which need not find record in this connection, since the result of it all will appear in due time and place.

All was quiet in that section of the city, and even after the three crooks had left The Patch far behind them, they neither saw nor heard aught to cause them alarm, or even uneasiness.

Apparently, the police were making very slight stir over the attack on the jail, and the chief gave an ugly laugh when Billy, the Banker, said something to this effect.

"Why would they, man? It's big dollars to little cents that they know just where Ross Montgomery has gone to, and no other prisoners were turned loose. I almost wish we had given every man jack of them their liberty, though! If nothing better, 'twould give the infernal hounds other scents to track out!"

Neither Barnes nor Metcalfe said aught in reply. They saw their commanding officer was in an ugly humor just then, and an incautious word might easily turn his ill-temper fairly their way.

Very few persons were about, it seemed, for they saw but one or two parties, and came into contact with neither of them. And this gave them sufficient courage to carry them in as direct a line as the streets would permit for Solomon Sober's residence.

As they drew near to their destination, the chief bade Billy, the Banker, hurry on in advance, as being less apt to scare the spy into hiding, since he had placed him on guard.

The bank-sneak willingly accepted the mission and hurried off, while the other crooks moved at a more leisurely pace.

Barnes used ample caution, too, and succeeded in finding the spy under cover as near the house as he could find good shelter. A few words passed between them, then Billy, the Banker, hurried Harvey back to join their mates, his face betraying good tidings even before a word was spoken.

"They're still under cover, Harvey?" asked the chief.

"Yes, sir; but old Zouche has been with them. He left not ten minutes before Billy came to where I was watching."

The chief gave a snarling curse at this wholly unexpected news.

"That does settle it, then! We've got to strike at once, or they'll get in their dirty work ahead of us!"

CHAPTER XVII.

WHO IS MAJOR MORDAUNT?

ROSS MONTGOMERY looked at Old Sober-sides with dawning curiosity, as the detective made that remark.

Lover though he was, and strong though his longing to hear more of that loved one, the escaped prisoner was yet a man, with his full share of mortal failings.

During his mental sufferings which had hardly been broken by a ray of hope since his arrest for the killing of Austin Bainbridge, Montgomery doubtless meant what he so often told himself: that life was not worth the living. But now that hope was coming to life again, he very naturally altered that gloomy opinion to correspond.

"If it can only be brought to pass!"

"It's got to come to pass, son, and if you'll help me, one-half as earnestly as you've been trying to hold back, all along, I'll go bail we'll come out on top of the heap, with trumpets blowing and banners flaunting—fit to kill!"

Old Sober-sides brought a clinched fist down on the little table with a vigor which caused the glasses to dance and the light to flicker. Beyond a doubt he was intensely in earnest, to make such an open exposition of his enthusiasm.

It seemed contagious, for that swarthy, bruised face opposite lighted up, and Ross Montgomery eagerly ejaculated:

"I knew it! You have found— What have you learned, dear friend?"

It was Old Sober-sides now, in face as in title, for the detective readily saw that this young man would require holding back, rather than urging ahead, once he felt himself fairly in harness.

"Not as much as we will find out, of

course," Sober replied, resolved to feel his way a little more cautiously. "But you hardly caught my meaning, son."

"I thought—I hoped you had at least found some positive clew to the devil who killed poor Bainbridge?"

His eyes, rather than his tongue, turned that husky sentence into a question, but Old Sober-sides shook his head in negation.

"I wish I had, my boy, but you're man enough to face the truth, now you've begun to get the jail-gloom out of your eyes. And so—there are two different lines open for you to follow, and about the first thing we tackle must be to decide which one will suit all hands the best."

"The one that will give me the most work to do, Mr. Sober," said Montgomery, quickly.

"Wait, son. There are different ways of working, just as there are different sorts of work. It's mighty easy to say I'll do this, that, or the other, but when you come to buckle down to business—well, that's a gray horse of another color!"

Ross Montgomery said nothing, though his dark eyes fairly glowed with eagerness. He longed to be doing something toward clearing away the hideous stigma which had been placed against his record, but what could he do alone?

He saw, too, that Old Sober-sides was in a garrulous humor, very unusual for one who was, as a rule, particularly chary of his words. He knew that when such an alteration did take place, it must be let run its course, pretty much like a fever.

Yet silence served him better than speech could have done. Old Sober-sides noted that self-restraint, and, laying his pipe aside, he leaned both elbows on the table, hands forming a frame for his broad face as he spoke more quickly:

"One way is for you to slip clean out of town, for every square yard of this city will be searched by the chief before he'll give up hopes of recovering you, son!"

"I don't like that notion, sir. What is the other plan?"

"Wait. One way is to skip out, to lie in snug hiding until the real facts can be brought to light. That may not be the most exciting sort of work, but I'm sure you'll find it hard enough work: and work you were asking for, remember, son!"

Montgomery flushed a bit before that keen glance and quizzical tone, but then he made reply:

"I deserved the lesson, sir, no doubt, and 'twill not be forgotten. Still, I'd like to hear your other plan, if it isn't asking too much."

"That is, to let me disguise you a bit, so you can take part in clearing up the mix."

"That suits me better, sir, and I gladly accept. Only tell me what to do first, and be sure you'll never have to fault me for laziness or lack of nerve."

"Just the contrary, I'm thinking," said Old Sober-sides, with a frown drawing wrinkles around his eyes as they gazed intently into that flushed, eager face. "You'll need the carb a great deal more than the spur, I reckon, son!"

"I'll obey your slightest sign or wish, sir, only—let me be doing something, or I'll turn crazy in good earnest!"

"A crazy man would hardly help me over the rifles, though."

"It's only because I'm held in doubt, Mr. Sober. Just say that you will put me to work, bringing truth to light, and I'll prove myself a true Montgomery, never fear. You will give me this chance?"

The Old-Style Detective was grave enough now, and he spoke slowly, like one who wishes to make each word thoroughly understood.

"As I said, Montgomery, words are easy, but doing is hard. If you elect to remain in town, working under my instructions, it will be like taking your very life in your hand, exposed to all who may have an interest in claiming it. Every step will be one of danger, for you'll not only have to fool the police, but cheat your enemies—and that means fighting as ugly a gang of devils as Satan ever commanded!"

Ross Montgomery never flinched, but quietly spoke:

"Better so, sir. It will keep me from thinking too much of—of her. And the danger don't count, so long as I'm given a chance to clear my record once more."

He calmly met that keen, searching gaze, his only change of countenance being the coming of a slight smile.

Old Sober-sides gave a little grunt of approval, nodding his head emphatically as he said:

"You'll do, I reckon. That's the good old Montgomery blood, and a purer, grittier breed never wore shoe-leather!"

"Thanks. But you spoke of disguising me; can that be done, so as to defy detection, think?"

"So that Adella Palmer would never know you from an entire stranger, son, and that's the severest test I can think of," declared the detective, his eyes glowing and his thick lips spreading in a silent laugh.

"If you are satisfied, Mr. Sober, be sure I am. Please fall to work, then, for I'm all on needles until I can feel I'm doing—"

"There's another chair, son, and if you're so mighty uneasily seated, I reckon you'd better shift, a bit," coolly interrupted Old Sobersides.

"But, I thought—"

"That's all right, of course. I expected to do the thinking for this combination, but since you're—"

"Pardon me, Mr. Sober. I'll wait your pleasure," almost meekly said the escaped prisoner.

"That's a little more like it, Ross," dropping his drawing, patronizing tone for one more natural. "All you need is a taste of the curb at the start, and now I've given it, we'll get down to sober business."

"As I said, I think I can disguise you so that you might brush shoulders with Chief Zouche, and he never suspect how near he was to the man he fairly aches to recapture; but there's time enough before us, and a little of that spent in taking a calm look over the ground we'll have to cover, will hardly be thrown away."

Taught wisdom by his repeated snubbings, Ross Montgomery said nothing. Old Sobersides dropped into a reverie, thumb and forefinger pinching and twisting his pliable under-lip, while his eyes seemed to glaze over as they stared at vacancy.

Only for a few seconds, and then the detective spoke briskly:

"I know you never harmed Bainbridge, but he was killed, all the same. Those two curs never found pluck enough to put out his light, even if he was drunk. Then—where's the next man to look over?"

"I saw Bainbridge that same evening, something like an hour before he must have come to his ending. When I saw him, he was in company with another man, a complete stranger to me, who wore the undress uniform of an infantry officer."

"Major Mordaunt?"

"What do you know of him, son?" a keen glow leaping into his eyes as they turned full upon Montgomery.

"Only what I heard through Flighty Fan. She seemed to take a deep interest in all that concerned me, God bless her!"

Further questioning brought out the fact that Montgomery knew nothing personally of the red-bearded officer, and that the information given him by Fanny Ernest amounted to little more than the bare fact that such a personage had been seen in company with Bainbridge only a short time before his death.

Old Sobersides was plainly disappointed at this, but after his usual custom, tried to make the best of it.

"Just about what Nipper Noll let drop! Well, as I set out to explain, chance gave me a pretty fair squint at this Major Mordaunt, as he seems to be called. Of course I had nothing to make me take particular note of the fellow, just then, but I knew Bainbridge so well that, seeing him a good bit under the weather, it was only natural I should take a look to be sure he wasn't in the grip of a crook."

"Now, if Major Mordaunt isn't a crook, why don't he turn up to explain how and where he parted with Bainbridge that night? Why can't we find some trace of his leaving the city, since he almost surely isn't openly living here? Well, because I believe this Major Mordaunt knows just how and just why Austin Bainbridge met death that night!"

"You think—"

"I've been doing a sight of thinking, of late, son, and I've come to one conclusion: right or wrong, I believe this Major Mordaunt is one of the outfit who called themselves 'The Brothers of Bullet and Steel.'"

Montgomery opened his eyes widely at that curious title.

"Who, or what are they, sir?"

"Well, I'm not quite ready to tell that, even if I knew it all," was the grave answer. "Enough for now, though, that it's a gang of dirty devils, turning their hands to anything, from sneaking an entry, to cutting a throat."

"A regularly organized band, do you mean, sir?"

"Yes, I think I may say that much," replied Old Sobersides, after a brief hesitation, during which his keen eyes were scanning the face opposite him. "I can't tell you everything, simply because I'm not so thoroughly posted my own self, although I've been on their track for nearly six months past."

"Of course, sir, I'm not asking you to share any of your professional secrets with me, but if you think this Major Mordaunt—"

"Wait a bit, please, my son. As I said, I've been looking up this gang for a good six months. I've made sure there is such an organization, which covers a good many cities besides this; but that don't count, here."

"I know that both Nipper Noll and Nosey Clark, the two crooks who swore they saw you shoot Austin Bainbridge, belong to the Brothers. And while I never saw any person just like this Major Mordaunt, before or since that night, I more than suspect he also belongs to the gang."

"If your guess is right, can't the whole truth be pinched out of those two rascals?" eagerly asked Montgomery. "I understand they are

being held in custody, to act as witnesses against me, at my preliminary examination."

"Which will probably have to be postponed, *sine die*," with one of his dry chuckles. "But you spoke of pinching Pickett and Clark. That might bring forth rather more than we'd care to hear, just now."

"What do you mean, Mr. Sober?"

"Well, I've picked up a number of odds and ends, looking after this outfit, and I'm more than half convinced that Austin Bainbridge was in some manner mixed up with the Brothers."

"Impossible! I can't bring myself to believe that of him, sir!"

"Maybe not, yet facts all look that way. And I'm thinking what I am holding back, would startle you more yet, my son."

CHAPTER XVIII.

TWO DIFFERENT THEORIES.

ROSS MONTGOMERY looked as though he was eager to ask for further information on that point, but he had not quite forgotten the little lessons read him by this odd worthy, and locked his lips tightly.

Still, he could not so completely control his eyes, and gazing into their burning depths, Old Sobersides laughed softly, though his face remained as grave as ever.

"It's trust all, or trust nothing, with me, son," he added, seriously. "Until I could fairly make up my mind just how far I might rely on your nerve in this matter, I fought shy, as a matter of course. But that time has passed, and—listen!"

"You know that Austin Bainbridge is really no blood relative of the little lady. They call each other brother and sister, but both mother and father were different."

"His father played me a dirty trick, which I've never forgotten, though I've tried mighty hard to forgive; I'm not saying that I succeeded, mind you, though!"

"Austin's mother was all right, but his father was bad to the very core, and Austin took a fair share of that bad blood to himself, I'm thinking. And yet, rather wild than actually evil, I should say."

"I haven't been able to clear all points up, you mind, son, but I've learned enough to feel certain Bainbridge was mixed up with this evil gang, even if he wasn't actually an active member. I hardly think he was that; I believe he was their dupe, rather."

"Up to the time of his killing, I held harder thoughts toward the young fellow, but now—I believe he was killed by a member of the Brothers of Bullet and Steel, as the first step toward securing full possession of the fortune left jointly to Austin and Della!"

Ross Montgomery gave a hoarse, gasping cry, starting to his feet as those grave words came to his ears.

"Then—merciful heavens, man! If you're right, think of Adella!"

"Quiet, son! Sit down and hold in, or I'll say no more!" sternly commanded Old Sobersides.

Like one partially stunned, Ross Montgomery obeyed. His face was ghastly pale, and he trembled like one in a strong chill.

"Now, son, tell me what flea's biting you?"

"Guard her—my love!"

"Don't be all fool, son, if you hope to be of any service either to Miss Palmer or to yourself," sternly reproved the detective. "Do you think I've been idle, all this time? Have you forgotten what I told you not so very long since: that I loved the mother, even as you claim to love that mother's daughter?"

"But—if Austin was killed for his money, Adella surely will be taken next, unless—"

"Quiet, for the last time, hot-head!" and Old Sobersides leaned over the little table to push Montgomery back into his chair. "Mind you, boy, all this is only a guess of mine, and it may turn out to be a thousand miles wide of the truth. Still, can you for an instant think that I haven't taken precautions to guard her child against even such a wild chance?"

Montgomery made no answer. He dared not trust himself, just then, for if he offended this friend, where could he turn for another?

Old Sobersides remained silent for a brief space, pulling at his under-lip, always a sign with him of troubled thought or mental perplexity.

But then his frown cleared away, and leaning on the table, holding the eyes of Ross Montgomery with his steady, honest gaze, he spoke:

"Since I've told you so much, son, I'll let you have the rest of it, and then we'll try to add the sum together."

"As I said, I only went so far as to connect Bainbridge with this gang of devils in human shape, up to the time he was murdered. Since then, I've done a powerful sight of thinking, and, boiled down, this is the conclusion I've reached:

"First, you know how the Palmer property was disposed of: one-half to each of the children. In case either should die unmarried, the other was to receive the entire sum. While both lived, single, the property was to be kept together, as free to one as to the other."

"It was a foolish will, of course, but a true,

loving, pure heart dictated it, and she certainly meant all for the best."

"Well, given so much to start on, the rest comes easily enough. With Austin Bainbridge dead, Adella would be doubly an heiress. If the same blow that removed him, could be utilized in disposing of the lover whom she was inclined to marry—Steady, son!"

Ross Montgomery almost leaped from his seat at that cool statement, but sunk back at that stern reminder, biting his lips until they bled in his effort to smother the words which strove for utterance.

"Don't interrupt me, son, for I've nearly finished. After that, if you can't hold in, I'll give you free swing o' the tongue," quietly added Old Sobersides.

"Mind you, Ross, this is not proven facts I'm giving you, but simply the foundation for two different theories I've shaped in my mind. They may be both wholly wrong, though I'm willing to lay odds that one of the two will turn out to be very nearly correct, when all is laid bare."

"First, then, there ought to be another lover in the case: is there such a one, son?"

"If by lover, you mean—"

"I mean a lover, whether favored or not. Do you know of any man who is, or who has been, paying court to the little lady?"

"Captain Thornton would like to be that, but—" hesitatingly began Montgomery, but breaking off without finishing his sentence.

Old Sobersides nodded his head, understandingly.

"I thought as much, but preferred you to bring in his name. Well, if we take one view of the case, it might be just as well to keep a watchful eye on Frank Thornton, but we'll let that flea stick by the wall for a minute."

"Next, who would fall heir to the Palmer property in case Adella should follow Bainbridge to another world?"

Ross Montgomery shrunk from that baldly-put query, but shook his head, as token of his ignorance.

"You don't know who would be the legal heir, then? Well, I've taken pains to post myself on that point, of course, just as soon as the second theory presented itself to my mind."

"Now, to go back a little further: when Chief Zouche and I called on you in jail, just after your arrest, you declined to say anything until after you had consulted with your legal adviser. He was sent for, at your request, I believe?"

"Yes. I was so stunned by the terrible shock that I dared say or do nothing without a cooler, clearer brain than my own to guide me."

"That lawyer was one Gibson, was it not?"

"James Gibson, yes, sir."

"Have you known him very long? Have you been intimately acquainted with him? As a man, rather than a lawyer, I mean, of course."

"No; I can't say that I have. A friend of mine once recommended him very highly, and his was the first name that came to me, when I felt the need of a legal adviser. Why do you ask?"

"Well, it's a rather odd coincidence, when you come to look it all over. Are you sure no one suggested his name? That you elected him as your adviser of your own free will?"

"Certainly I did! Surely you can't mean—"

"I mean that James Gibson is now nearest of kin to Adella Palmer, my son," quietly asserted the Old-Style Detective.

Ross Montgomery gazed bewilderedly at that enigmatical face, even yet at a loss to understand just what point Sober was trying to make.

Old Sobersides saw as much, and added the words:

"If Adella Palmer should die unmarried, the entire Palmer fortune would fall to James Gibson."

Then the startling truth burst upon the young man, but his ejaculation was one of indignation rather than horror.

"I catch your meaning, sir, but I can't believe either of your two theories. Thornton is a gentleman, and so is Gibson. Neither of them would be so infernally base as to even dream of such a hideous plot as this you are trying to fix upon them!"

"Steady, son!" came in sharp warning from Old Sobersides, his right hand going up in admonition. "I'm making no charges, understand. I'm simply stating facts, at present."

"I know, sir, but—it is incredible! I'd almost as quickly think myself guilty of murdering Austin Bainbridge, as to believe either of those gentlemen committed the crime!"

"Still, you'll hardly deny that the killing took place, Montgomery. You stand accused, but you are innocent. You come of a good family as either of those men, yet that does not save you from being thought, by thousands of honest people, to be an assassin."

"Now, Austin Bainbridge was never murdered or ordinary plunder. I saw the body before the police came up, and I saw that his watch and diamond studs were still in place. I was near him long enough before a sound of the police came to my ears, to know that he had been lying helpless still longer. If this was an ordinary killing, why was his jewelry and his mo-

ney—his pocket was literally crammed with bills, as I saw when the body was inspected by the coroner and his jury—not taken by his slayer?"

"I know, but still I can't believe either Thornton or Gibson killed Bainbridge! I simply can't, sir!"

"It does you credit, son, as I'm free to own, but—somebody killed the poor fellow, and that killing was for bigger stakes than any he carried on his person at the time."

"Mind you, Montgomery, I'm not bringing actual charges against either of these men. I'm simply stating the interest they *might* have in getting both Bainbridge and you out of the world."

"Thornton, in such a case, would be free to woo and—if fate favored him—win a wealthy bride. There would be no big brother to either share that fortune, or watch over the heiress."

"On the other hand, Gibson, too, is a single man, and plenty young enough to make a wooer. Or, if that failed, only one life would stand between himself and a great fortune."

With cool deliberation Old Sobersides stated the different points, seemingly without the slightest emotion on his part, and certainly paying precious little heed to the emotion which Ross Montgomery failed to keep entirely in check.

To the young man the detective seemed actually heartless, forgetting through what differently colored glasses they must be gazing.

"There you have the sum of my theories, young fellow," declared Old Sobersides, after a brief pause, during which he picked up his pipe to refill it, but at the same time glancing questioningly around the room, sniffing the air twice, as though his keen nostrils detected an unusual scent, yet without the power to locate it exactly.

"I'll freely admit that each theory has its weak points; theories generally *do* have, since they are only built on air, so to speak. I'll admit that both men are what is called good blood, and ordinarily they would be about the last persons on earth to be picked out for such devilish work. Still—"

He broke off, abruptly, glancing swiftly around the room, his nostrils quivering, his eyes catching a peculiar glow the while.

"I say, Montgomery," he broke forth, rising to his feet as he spoke, "you've not been smoking, of late. Can you smell anything stronger than tobacco-smoke? Isn't there a smell—"

Startled more by Sober's expression of face than by either words or action, Montgomery likewise sprung to his feet. Now that it had been mentioned, he *did* notice something which—Surely it was smoke!

Old Sobersides stooped to glance over the carpet, fancying that a match might have ignited the wool, through being dropped thoughtlessly, but nothing of the sort met his eyes, and pushing back his chair clear of the table, he glanced toward the door.

From the other side now came the sound of heavy footfalls on the stair, and hastily muttering:

"To the closet, man! It may be the police!"

He sprung to the door, holding it fast, but only for a moment or two. For through the barrier sounded a peculiar rap, which he instantly recognized as that sacred to his sister, and throwing it open, saw her.

"I'm afraid the house is on fire, Solomon," quietly said Hannah.

CHAPTER XIX.

FIRE, BULLET AND STEEL.

HANNAH SOBER might very well have expressed her conviction in stronger terms, for up the stairway came smoke too plain for any mistake, while the scent which had at first awakened the Old-Style Detective's suspicions, grew stronger with the passage of each moment.

"How did it happen?" asked Sober, hurriedly, betraying considerably less calm than his remarkable sister.

"That's more than I know, Solomon. I smelt the smoke, and when it begun to show so plainly, I thought it might be as well to let you know what appeared to be the matter."

"Good Lord!" exploded Solomon, with a half-indignant snort, almost upsetting the woman in his haste to break for the stairs. "Come, son! If you're as slow as Han, we'll all be roasted in our shells!"

Although not fully in the secret of the hidden closet, Ross Montgomery had instinctively sprung toward it at the detective's command, but paused with one hand feeling after the hidden spring, as Old Sobersides recognized the coming of a friend rather than that of an enemy.

Now, without a thought as to his own possible peril, the escaped prisoner hastened after his host, ready to do what he could to aid those who had given him shelter in his hour of need.

Wholly ignorant as to the plan of the building beyond the little he had seen while passing from front door to Solomon's den, Montgomery could do nothing better than blindly follow their lead.

Sober hastened from one room to another, his eyes and nose all at work, trying to locate the fire. That there was one, the increasing smoke

as well as a growing heat only too plainly proclaimed, but as yet neither one of the trio had been able to catch sight of a single tongue of flame.

Then, while Ross Montgomery was staring bewilderedly around them, Old Sobersides made the discovery which drew a low, stern ejaculation from his throat: the fire had been started outside of the house, and in at least two different quarters!

"Devil's work! All eyes open, son! This isn't an accident, but—"

"There's fire on the west side, too, Solomon," reported Hannah, coming hastily from another room.

"That *does* settle it, then! Look to the gent, Han! Show him the way to the stable, and don't—I've got to act!"

Truly, there was no time to lose, if aught was to be done toward saving the building.

Already the flames were beginning to roar as well as crackle, and a dull, reddish glare was coming in through the side windows, while the open space in front of the house itself seemed rapidly losing its nightly gloom.

Every man has his weak point, and it now appeared as though the joint in Old Sobersides's armor had been found. He seemed half-wild with excitement, and even while his hastily uttered words plainly indicated suspicion of foul play, he unfastened the front door, flinging it wide open, springing over the threshold with a loud, far-reaching cry of fire! fire! fire!

That was before the day of telephones and electric calls, of course, and sending in the word of a midnight fire was quite a different matter from what it has since become. Then much depended upon legs and tongue, and Solomon Sober backed up the last with a pair of most powerful lungs, trying to rouse the neighborhood before the fire had gained too great headway.

Doubtless he would have succeeded, too, had he been left free to maintain that sturdy call, but the instant he cleared the doorsill, there came a deadly rush of armed men, obedient to a harsh voice which broke forth from the night:

"There he is! Take him—the firebug!"

And doing their level best to carry out that diabolical scheme, a full half-dozen desperate wretches flung themselves in a body upon the detective, striking and cursing, in their eagerness to make swift and sure work of it, hindering each other.

Fighting fire and fighting men were two very different things, so far as Old Sobersides was concerned, and now that he knew his very life was aimed at, he was once more himself: striking out lustily with his heavy fists, dashing back a thug here, tumbling another rascal over there, giving himself a bear-like shake that broke as many more savage holds, leaving him still greater space for defending his life.

It was a marvelous spectacle, had any one been cool enough to take critical note, just then. Six lusty knaves had made the first onset, no doubt expecting to down their man before he could fairly realize the nature of his peril; but half their number had gone to earth before those mighty fists, and Old Sobersides seemed just waking up!

The ruddy glow of the rapidly-gaining fire lent a fitting light to the spectacle, and another harsh call came from the chief of the evil gang:

"Smash him, boys! You've got to smash him, or—*Now, all together!*"

There came a rush of other thugs who had just gained the scene, but at the same time Ross Montgomery, swinging a heavy oaken chair over his head by its back, sprung to the aid of his friend, striking as he came.

And Hannah Sober, now crying shrilly for help, now blowing a piercing blast on her police-whistle, right womanly added her quota to the thrilling drama.

There was no need for Ross Montgomery to ask questions, for the situation explained itself. With one exception, he need be under no dread of harming friend or honest man, and with hearty good-will he plied his weapon, checking that rush even as it began.

Again the chief of the lawless gang recognized face and figure, and again he called out to his tools:

"Now—clean work, boys! Both of them—you've got to do it, or pay penalty!"

He sprung forward himself, a gleam of bared steel in his grip, and endeavored to close with the younger of the two men.

He dodged a sweeping blow from that heavy chair, and gave a low, vicious snarl as he shot out his right arm with knife in his grip. He felt it reach the mark, but before he could do more, a reeling thug, sent back by the detective's fist, tripped him up, both knaves falling in company.

Ross Montgomery felt the hot sting of steel, but he only fought the more desperately, for now the street seemed fairly swarming with devils in human shape, yelling, cursing, threatening, and every one of them seemed to him as though choosing his life for their first mark.

More than one crown was cracked by that good chair, but it was breaking now, and its wielder was beginning to grow sick and faint as he felt himself forced back, blood trickling from more than one cut through clothes and

through skin—how much deeper he could not say.

"Down him! Make sure of him, boys!" pantingly cried the chief, once more upon his feet and joining in the rush.

"Back, ye hellhounds!" thundered Old Sobersides, as he saw the young man go down before that vicious rush.

His fists seemed to weigh a ton, and his sturdy body plowed an opening through that mass of wickedness. He caught Ross Montgomery with his left arm as the young man struggled to his feet, and springing back until his rear was guarded by the house-wall, the Old-Style Detective cried, aloud:

"Back, ye devils! Back, or I blow ye through!"

His bloody right hand gripped a revolver, its muzzle menacing the thugs before them, more than one of whom shrunk away, ducking or lifting arm as shield for their heads.

Almost any other man would have fired without warning, but, above all else, Solomon Sober was an advocate for law and order, and only to guard the life of his young friend had he resorted to other weapons than those he had carried since life began for him.

A heavy stone, flung from the outer circle, knocked the revolver from his hand, the weapon exploding as it fell.

"Now! *mash them!* you've got to mash 'em!"

The rush started, and Old Sobersides let Ross Montgomery fall from his arm, stepping out a pace to give his arms full play. He meant fight to the end, but before the full force of the rush could reach him Hannah Sober came to the front once more.

"Be off, ye scoundrels!" she cried, shrilly, and then a heavily-loaded shotgun spoke.

Yells of fear and pain burst from the gang as that rush was checked, and as the second barrel exploded, sending its load of bird-shot at short range among their legs and feet, the rascals broke, yelling, cursing, limping right briskly!

At the same time there came the shrill whistle of police-calls from no great distance, and as the two men sunk to the ground together, the chief gave the signal for hasty retreat.

Like birds of the night the gang sped away, and not one of them was within reach as two sturdy policemen came rushing up, backed by a number of the neighbors, who plucked up courage a little at sight of those uniforms.

At their coming, Hannah Sober dropped her good gun and sprung to aid her brother, at the same time freeing her calico apron to drop over the head and face of Ross Montgomery. Even in such a moment she could think of what Old Sobersides had told her!

Solomon Sober himself raised up, somewhat out of breath from his tremendous exertions during those few minutes, but otherwise little worse for wear.

He was recognized by the policemen, but before they could ask any dangerous questions, he cried out:

"Tell you later, lads; see if you can't help save the house, for I'm not insured!"

The big fire-bell began to boom, and the policemen never gave more than a passing glance at Ross Montgomery, turning away to press the gathering neighbors into service, to save furniture if they could do nothing better.

Comparatively brief as had been the time since the fires were first discovered, they had gained great headway, and the building itself was almost certainly doomed to utter destruction.

Yet, picking Ross Montgomery up in his arms, tossing his limp form over one shoulder, Solomon Sober hurried into the smoke-filled house, paying no heed to the startled cries of warning which broke from both police and citizens as they witnessed his mad action.

The next few minutes were full of wild confusion, for one of the steam fire engines came thundering up, scattering the gathered crowd, making far more noise than doing material service, thanks to a delay on the part of the hose-carriage.

And then, as the roof fell in, sending up great swirls of sparks and fiery smoke, people told each other that Solomon Sober, and at least one other, had surely met death in that roaring hell of flames!

CHAPTER XX.

PAYING THE BLOOD-MONEY.

SEEING the detective and his ward both sink down as though yielding to their wounds, if not to actual death, and hearing the trampling of coming police, the chief of that evil gang gave the signal to scatter and save themselves, setting a good example on his own part.

Still, he was cool enough to take a little further precaution, and then, having made sure no spy was dogging his footsteps, he made his way into The Patch, finding Dolly Varden's place open, as customary.

A few men were in the saloon, but none of whom the chief needed feel fear or uneasiness, as a single glance assured him. One and all were members of the gang who had come from the scene of the fire.

"All the rest made a break when the fire-bell sounded, sir," said Dolly, noting that glance,

"No place like it, ye know, for picking up stray odds and ends, and the lads are always on the make. How did it pan out, boss?"

"See you later, Varden. Just now—send in the boys as they come back, will you?"

Without satisfying the saloon-keeper's curiosity further, just then, the chief passed from saloon through a dark passage leading to the rendezvous where was met the League before.

He was followed by the other members, some of them limping painfully, others gingerly feeling of blackening eyes and swelling bumps.

The lights were still burning, and the chief at once took his seat at the further end of the low-ceiled den, for a brief space bowing face in hands, elbows supported by the little stand before his chair. He seemed deep buried in thought, and none of his men cared particularly about rousing him with what he might consider ill-timed questions.

Singly and in couples the remainder of the Brothers dropped in, until, in less than half an hour, the assembly seemed complete.

Not until then did their leader speak, and his first words bade the gang line up, for roll-call.

That was but the work of a minute or two, and as a pause followed, one gruff-voiced fellow said aloud:

"All here but—whar's Zene Harvey?"

"I detailed him for special duty, brethren," answered their chief. "That completes the roll-call, and I'm more than glad to see that none of the family have come to grief."

"Mebbe 'tain't grief, boss, but I know it's durned sharp stingin' fer my sheer!" gruffly retorted the big fellow, stooping to gingerly rub his sprinkled legs. "Ef I didn't ketch moreshot! Bet I'll weigh a solid pound more'n I did when I fu'st got thar, too!"

The chief broke into a half-sneering laugh, then spoke briskly:

"Nothing really worth howling about, brother. I took my full share of both charges, yet I can hide my smarts, and laugh to think how completely we scotched our enemies!"

"Ef they'll on'y stay that way, boss!"

"I know Montgomery will, for one. I gave him the full length of my knife, and I saw others pay him their compliments, after the same fashion. And from the way Old Sobersides went down, I reckon he's past giving us any trouble for a while, if not for all time to come."

"Now, brothers, to business which I think will suit you better than empty talking. I'm not so flush as I would have been had I known any such important job as this was to come in hand to-night, but I've got enough shekels with me to pay each of you an installment."

A subdued cheer greeted this speech, and the chief added:

"Fall in line, and don't try to multiply yourselves, I beg of you! My heart is willing, of course, but my pocketbook wouldn't stand it, in its present state of lankness."

The chief seemed in particularly good humor, for his jests were rare indeed. That they could be given now, helped hearten up even those who had suffered most in that hot if brief encounter.

As each brother presented himself in turn before the stand, he was paid a small amount of blood-money, and when the last in line had received his portion, their leader spoke again:

"Of course this is only an earnest of what you will receive, my brethren. Although I had no direct instructions from the head center to put these two men out of our path, I have no fears but what my action will be fully upheld when my report is sent in."

"Still, if it should not be, no harm can come to any one of you. I ordered the work done, and you were bound by oath to obey. I will have to stand good for the entire party, and just so I will be responsible for the rest of your head-money."

"You have done well, and I am proud of you, one and all. Of course we must expect old Zouche and his peelers to kick up a terrible row over what's taken place, but if you observe even ordinary caution, they can't lay hands on a single one of us, either for the racket at the jail, or this bit of cap-sheaf."

He paused, as though through, or else reflecting what more he ought to utter. And the silence was broken by grunts and grumblings, coming from those of the lawless gang who had been most liberally sprinkled by Hannah Sober's bird-shot.

And one of these, smarting from his hurts, put into words the fears which were troubling more than one of his mates.

"If the cops take a hunt for us, won't these durn pellets give us away, though, boss?"

"Not unless you are fools enough to help the cops out, brother," lightly replied their leader. "You're none of you hurt so badly but what you could navigate quite lively, were you? Well, then you're in no need of more skillful doctoring than you can do yourselves, or for one another. Pick the shot out, if you don't care to carry them about with you as sister Hannah's love-tokens!"

"So much for the bird-shot. As for cracked crowns and blackened eyes, such marks are ever too plenty in the Patch for aught dangerous to be read from them."

"Now, you had better go hunt your regular holes, brothers. If you will rest any the more easily for taking that precaution, you can hatch up an alibi which will stand good against all the powers of Chief Zouche."

"Go, now, and wait quietly for the next call. Don't talk either job over among yourselves, much less mention it to outsiders, or where there is the slightest chance for a spy to catch on."

Waiting until the last man had left the rendezvous, the chief followed after, entering the saloon, where he promptly caught the eye of Dolly Varden, who shortly after led the way to a low-ceiled chamber over the grog-shop, where he placed chairs at a dingy-topped table, on which he quickly deposited both cigars and liquor, saying lightly:

"I reckon you've done work enough, sir, to need a bit of oiling-up, and a cigar always makes the stuff taste better, to my notion."

Evidently Varden was talking quite as much for his own tastes as for those of his guest, since he took an immediate dose of each: smacking his lips over the whisky, and leaning easily back in his chair as he blew twin puffs of blue vapor through his broad nostrils.

Yet there was an air of anxious anticipation in his eyes, if not in his demeanor. He watched that heavily-bearded face closely, and his ears even seemed to prick up a bit as the chief spoke:

"Just to keep you in countenance, old man. I'm not a slave to one or the other, though both taste a great deal better than a gentleman would expect to run across here in The Patch."

"If a cove can't be good to himself, what's the use in living?" grunted Varden, refilling his glass and holding it admiringly between eye and candle. "Of course I don't pass this over the bar, below. I'd like to, well enough, but the boys couldn't appreciate it, and dead sure wouldn't pay the cost. So— I'm looking at you, boss!"

Varden honestly drained his glass, but the other barely moistened his lips. It was no part of his plans to muddle his wits, just then.

"You don't drink, man!"

"Because I'd rather talk, my hero. Don't you care to learn just how our little venture panned out, to-night?"

"Try me, and see how I'll drink it in, sir!"

The chief complied, giving a brief but clear account of all that had taken place: of what they learned from the spy, of the manner in which they fled the house, to bring its inmates the more surely into their clutches.

He gave a fairly accurate sketch of the desperate fight which followed the coming forth of Old Sobersides, and in ending, once more expressed his firm conviction that Ross Montgomery, at least, was dead.

"Of course I'd have put everything past questioning, only the cops came with a rush, and the neighbors were drawing too close for either comfort or safety. Still, Montgomery dead, Old Sobersides can't work us much harm, even if he should look in our direction for the authors."

Dolly Varden drew a long breath, but there was more of exultation than doubt to be read in his florid face.

"It's tough work—tough and risky!" he said, lowly. "But I do reckon it'll be well worth all that, when we get our grip on the big pile! Eh, boss?"

"Of course it will. And with Bainbridge killed, Montgomery ditto, Sober on the sick-list at least, we're narrowing the matter down to a mighty sharp point. Fill up, Dolly, and I'll give you a toast."

Varden obeyed, and then the chief added:

"To the heiress of the Palmer fortune! If she drops willingly into the hands which are reached toward her, may she live long and prosper! If she don't—good luck and long life to her next of kin!"

This time both glasses were drained, and then Dolly Varden permitted his curiosity to gain the upperhand, asking bluntly:

"I know what we're playing for, but that's about all I do know. Who's next of kin? When is the finishing touch to be put on?"

But he was asking entirely too much, and his companion at once resumed his customary cold reticence.

"You'll know all in good time, never fear. I can't say anything more, just now, because much depends on how this last stroke turns out."

"I left Harvey to take notes, but it's high time he was showing up, unless— Listen!"

"Talk of the devil, and you'll smell brimstone," chuckled Varden, rising to open the door through which they had gained the chamber. "Come in, Zene; the boss was just speaking of you, man!"

It needed but a single glance at that thin, shrewd visage to tell the chief Harvey was the bearer of no ill tidings, but he hastily said:

"Quick! Out with it, man! Your report?"

That was rapidly delivered. Harvey declared that Montgomery seemed already dead, but that even had life lingered, the flames certainly had finished their work.

All had seen Old Sobersides bear Montgomery into the house, but no one had seen either of

them come forth again. Beyond the possibility of a doubt they had perished in the flames!

CHAPTER XXI.

ANOTHER DUTY CALL.

CAPTAIN FRANK THORNTON was riding along the Carondelet Road, bound for the Palmer Place, and now, as on the evening which was marked by the death of Austin Bainbridge, his mind was full of the fair Adella.

Although of a different nature, his thoughts were hardly less excited now than they had been then, and while he was paying this call purely of his own volition, he felt it would be little less difficult than the mission which Old Sobersides had imposed upon him the night all this train of events began.

It was the evening succeeding the attack upon the jail by those whose plainly avowed intention was to lynch the assassin of Austin Bainbridge, and, as usual, the ubiquitous reporter had made the most of that sensational episode.

Nor was this all, though Thornton thought that more than enough. The evening papers had "caught on" to the true inwardness (as they called it) of the affair at Solomon Sober's, and greedily made the most of their chance.

Taking all into consideration, knowing as he did that Adella would certainly see the papers in her feverish eagerness to note progress in the Bainbridge case, Captain Thornton surely had cause for feeling more than a bit uneasy as he looked forward to his interview with the lady of his yet undeclared devotion.

As there can be no loss without some gain, the good horse which had been so unmercifully ridden on that other night, fared much better on this occasion, and gave his master a playful nibble on a shoulder, as Thornton was tying him to one of the stone posts planted in front of the Place.

His ring at the front door was answered by Mrs. Heaton, the housekeeper, who smiled sweetly upon the handsome young cavalryman, who was very near her *beau ideal* of a lover, and certainly her favorite over all who came to Palmer Place on wooing bent.

"Yes, sir, she's home," answered Mrs. Heaton, then adding in a confidential whisper: "And sore in need of comfort, the poor dear! If you only might—and I don't know of another who could, if he would, sir!"

Such words could hardly prove ungrateful to the ear of a man in love, and their nature probably accounted in part for the warm flush which tinged the captain's bronzed cheeks as he met and almost silently greeted Adella Palmer.

She was unusually pale, and her eyes bore traces of long and bitter weeping, but grief had not wasted her fine form, nor as yet deprived her of her customary strength.

Thornton's flush faded as he noticed a number of newspapers lying upon the center-table, under the hanging-lamp.

They were of fresh appearance, and almost surely those which contained sensational accounts of not only the attempted lynching, but of the after events, which, he feared, Adella would find still more painful to digest.

"You have been so long! I have waited and watched for your coming until— Pardon me, for I hardly know what I'm saying!"

Adella shrunk back a bit as that glad light leaped into the soldier's eyes. Being in love, Thornton took that welcome and those words for the man, not for the possible things he might be bearing; but that shrinking away and charge of tone warned him of his mistake.

"You bade me come back when I had learned all—when I had something of importance to report, Miss Palmer," he contrived to say, letting her hands drop, and turning toward the center table as an aid to cover his painful chagrin. "I hoped to come in time to spare you the sight of these abominable—"

"They are not true! Tell me they are lies—all lies!"

Her eagerness for that assurance was almost painful to the man who loved her so ardently, for right well he knew from what source it sprang.

For a brief space he hesitated. Why try to gloss it over? Why not let her take those sensational reports as bare truth? The end had come, so far as Ross Montgomery was concerned; why not let the blow hasten a cure, through its own brutal weight?

If he entertained such thoughts, was he so much to blame? Surely not, since he firmly believed Ross Montgomery had gone to his final account, with all his sins and weaknesses upon his head.

Yet Thornton almost doggedly held to the general plan which he had formed while on his way hither.

He led Adella back to the easy-chair from which she had risen at his coming, then seated himself in another, with the table between them.

"Although I was in hopes you would not have the papers, Miss Palmer," he began, gravely, "perhaps 'tis all for the best. If nothing more, it must have broken the unfortunate tidings which—"

"The reporters lied! Say that these horrible rumors are not true?"

"I wish I might say that, Miss Palmer, but you would never forgive me, when the truth came out, as it must in the long run. If not wholly true, those accounts are at least based on truth."

Adella bowed her face in her hands, uttering no cry, no sound, but shivering spasmodically.

Thornton longed to comfort her, but held himself in restraint. How could he lessen her fears? How assuage the bitter grief she must be feeling?

He took the only course left open for him, after that involuntary repulse, and no doubt the wisest one.

"I have not forgotten the words you spoke, that sad night, Miss Palmer, and if I haven't called on you before, it was simply because I dared not come without the news you begged me to bring."

He went on to tell all he had done while attempting to solve the mystery which appeared to surround the killing of Austin Bainbridge, and in a measure soothed by his richly modulated tones, Adella ceased to shiver, and presently lifted her head, watching his handsome face with painful intensity.

He had precious little to say from which comfort or consolation could be extracted by one who loved Ross Montgomery, but that little he generously made as prominent as his conscience would permit.

Then he came to the events of the past night, and told of the warning sent him through Solomon Sober, which was afterward so startlingly verified by events at the city jail.

"The papers declare the attack was made by friends to the—to Mr. Montgomery!" huskily spoke the maiden. "They lied, of course?"

"I think they were in error, so far," hesitated Thornton, then adding, more easily; "It seemed to me a genuine attack, and after the mob had scattered before my men, backed by the police, I sought out the jailer and questioned him closely."

"He seemed stunned or bewildered. He had been pretty roughly handled by the miscreants, but I think the heaviest blow to him came when he found out his most valued prisoner had vanished."

"Do you—is the hint given by the morning papers possible?" asked Adella, an unsteady hand touching that little pile of print.

Frank Thornton gave a perceptible start, and glanced quickly at the papers lying open between them. He had taken it for granted that the evening prints were among them, but now—would she dwell upon the jail attack and its events, while so much more terrible details were to be found in the accounts of the fire at Solomon Sober's place?

To help cover his agitation, the captain muttered something about having had time for but an imperfect perusal, and turned over the newspapers which lay upon the table. They were only morning issues!

"It is here," said Adella, pointing out a particular paragraph. "Of course I can never for a moment believe it, but—could even those abominable reporters think it true?"

Captain Thornton saw the paragraph alluded to, a full confession having been made by Ross Montgomery, admitting the killing of Austin Bainbridge and hinting at startling revelations which that confession contained, and broadly hinting that the attack on the jail had been made by former friends with the accused, who had determined to put him out of the way before he could rivet chains about their own limbs.

Glancing over this fragment of a fanciful imagination, gave him time to recover his usual composure, and then he assured Adella there was nothing to base such an assumption upon.

He might have said much more, but just then there came a sharp ring at the front door, and they waited the result, each feeling uneasiness.

Mrs. Heaton presently came to announce the caller, but before she could well pronounce his name, James Gibson brushed past her into the parlor.

He gave a quick glance and a short nod to Captain Thornton, then warmly greeted Adella, adding:

"I came on business, of course, my dear woman, but if I am intruding too seriously, why—"

"Not on my account, Mr. Gibson," coldly interposed Thornton, rising to his feet and picking up his military cap. "I have finished my call, and duty forbids my lingering longer. Still, I beg of you, sir, don't task Miss Palmer too heavily with business affairs: I fear she is hardly able to endure much more anxiety."

The lawyer bowed coldly, but said nothing in reply. And Adella bore Thornton company to the hall door, partially closing it behind them, as though to guard against her words being caught by other ears:

"You will call again, captain? Promise me, please? If you learn anything more—please find out the truth! This terrible suspense is fairly killing me by inches!"

"I'll do my level best, Ad—Miss Palmer."

He feared to say more, or to linger under the stars with that face, ten-fold more lovable now that it was so pale and grief-marked. He gave

her trembling hands an ardent pressure, then turned and hastened down to where his horse was hitched.

He paused there until he saw the light shut out as Adella passed into the house, closing the door behind her. He gave a long breath, that was almost a sigh, as he lost sight of that loved form.

"Curse that fellow! What evil imp brought him here, just—and yet, oughtn't I to give thanks, instead?"

Strong man though he was, Frank Thornton shivered a bit as he sprang into the saddle and turned away from the place.

Had he remained, how could he have avoided letting drop something of the terrible news contained by the evening papers?

He was wondering whether James Gibson would be equally considerate on his part, when his wandering gaze was arrested by a shadow—was it more than a shadow? Wasn't that the skulking, slinking figure of a human being?

With an instinctive fear for Adella Palmer, Thornton turned his horse, leaping over the low fence, dashing direct for the spot where he had sighted that shadow. He sternly called a halt, but the shape vanished without a sound, nor could his most persistent searching uncover aught which might confirm that first wild suspicion of impending peril.

CHAPTER XXII.

A CRUSHING STROKE.

ADELLA PALMER returned to the parlor, after parting with Captain Thornton at the door.

Lawyer Gibson was standing at the center-table, turning over the little pile of papers lying thereon, and his face seemed unusually pale as he glanced up, to meet her inquiring gaze.

Mr. Gibson was a man near middle age; probably between thirty-five and forty years old. Without being what is commonly called handsome, he was a fine looking man, with a strong, intellectual face and head.

As Ross Montgomery intimated to Old Sobersides, James Gibson had been selected to defend the young Carolina refugee, and his reputation as a shrewd, keen, far-sighted lawyer, well merited such appreciation.

Besides being a relative, he had long held legal supervision over the Palmer property, and quite naturally was on very familiar footing with Adella, the last of her name and race.

"Did Thornton fetch you these papers, 'Della?" he asked, giving the prints a little rap with his long, white forefinger.

"No. They came by carrier, as usual. But why do you ask?"

Instead of replying at once, James Gibson, with rare courtesy in one who ordinarily paid too scant attention to the little suavities due the fair sex, took Adella's hand, and with gentle force made her take a seat on the sofa. Then, with his back to the light, casting his own face into the shadow, he seated himself in a chair, all before speaking.

There was something so unusual in his manner, or his air, rather, that Adella took fresh alarm, impulsively breaking forth with:

"You have bad news, sir? Something even worse has happened, if possible, and you— Tell me, what is it now?"

"If bad news, 'twill keep; if good, you need preparing for the shock, just as surely, my poor child," slowly answered the lawyer.

"Poor child! Then— Tell me all! See! I am strong—strong enough to hear, and yet endure!"

James Gibson frowned a bit, for he certainly did not intend his words to lend this impression. Still, since the bitter truth must come out, sooner or later, did it matter so much?

Lawyer-like, however, he tried to temporize, and in place of bluntly revealing what had brought him to Palmer Place that evening, he strove to lead up to it by degrees.

"I'll tell you all I know, of course, Adella, but you must remember my profession, and what great sticklers we lawyers are for proceeding in regular routine."

"One word: he has not—not been recaptured?"

"If by 'he' you mean Ross Montgomery, I may safely say that he has not been recaptured, my dear," quietly replied Gibson. "And now, no more questions until I have delivered my report, please."

Adella sunk back upon the sofa, with a long breath of relief. Her worst fears set at rest, she thought she could wait with patience.

"To go back to the beginning, then, you sent me word to take up the case of this young man. I had just received a note from Montgomery, himself, making the same request."

"You did not tell me this before!"

"Simply because you were hardly composed enough to be told, or for me to enter into needless details, child," quietly replied Gibson, a faint smile coming into his strong face. "After all, what did it matter who retained me, so long as I took up the case?"

"I had one interview with Mr. Montgomery, in jail. He flatly denied his guilt, of course. Wait: I say of course, but I am not casting even a slur his way. Even if guilty, he would naturally deny such a dangerous accusation."

"He is not guilty—he could never have—have done that cruel deed! It hurts me even to have you use such words."

"The whole world couldn't make me do that, willfully, my dear girl," quickly said Gibson, leaning forward to take one of her trembling hands between his own palms. "I'll try to be more guarded in my use of words, though I fear I'll be obliged to pain you still deeper, or suppress at least part of the truth."

"Tell me all. I'll try to bear it, even— Tell me the whole truth, sir, if you tell me anything."

"Montgomery was naturally too deeply shaken to give me very much light, and so I left him, making another appointment, later. Meantime, I used what outside information I could pick up, and I put a spy on the hunt for the Major Mordaunt spoken of in the papers which you have read."

"You found him? He must be the assassin! Say you found him, sir?"

"Not yet, but I have strong hopes in that direction. And now—you read the morning papers, of course?"

He glanced toward the center-table, and Adella assented.

"Yes. It was terrible, but how could I help it? And that jail-attack! Oh, how can such people live?"

"Well, it takes all sorts to make up a world, little woman, and if there were no knaves, we lawyers would have to learn another profession, or locate in poor-houses."

It was a very brief, very soft and mellow laugh with which Mr. Gibson punctuated this playful sentence, but Adella shrunk back, freeing her hand, shivering like one dealt a cruel blow. To her it sounded so heartless—to laugh, while the poor lad she loved so tenderly was in such peril!

"You think me callous, Adella, but some day you will do me more nearly justice," he said, quietly, a grave expression chasing that smile away. "For your part, you are entirely too sensitive, and unless you can recover something of your usual nerve I must take my leave without telling you my real reasons for paying this call."

Something in his tones gave the maiden a fresh shock, but though she tried hard to read his full meaning in his eyes, she failed. Then, with an effort at self-control, she begged him to proceed.

He hesitated for a time, but then spoke, almost harshly:

"I've got to do it, of course! If I don't, you will learn all from the evening papers, so—"

"Tell me what you mean, sir!" demanded Adella, rallying strongly, facing the lawyer with hectic spots burning on each cheek. "It is about Ross Montgomery. Tell me all, or, late as it is, I'll order my horse and ride into town for the papers you speak of!"

There was no alternative left him. He had said too much, not to say more, and he bravely plunged into the trouble.

"There was a fire last night. It happened too late to get into the morning papers, but the others have a fairly accurate account."

"You have them with you? They are in your pocket?" her eyes resting on a protuberance under his closely-buttoned coat.

"Yes, but you can't have them, just yet," Gibson said, quickly. "I'll tell you enough for all purposes, if you'll only try to bear up, like a true woman."

"Go on. Tell me all, or—"

"That fire, then, was at the house of an old acquaintance of yours. Solomon Sober was burnt out last night."

"Go on! There is something more! Go on, I bid you, sir!"

"The reporters say that two lives were lost in that fire. One was that of Solomon Sober, the other—none of the papers could find out just who or what he was, but—"

"Not—merciful heavens!" gasped the poor girl, tossing up her arms as the terrible meaning flashed across her brain.

She fell heavily along the sofa, and James Gibson sprang to her aid with a sharp cry of alarm.

That cry reached the ears of Mrs. Heaton, and she came rushing into the room, filled with sympathy for Adella, of indignation against the man who had been the cause of it all.

The poor girl rallied far more speedily than either of those bending over the sofa could expect, and her first action was to catch at the corner of a newspaper which showed at Gibson's breast. It was so folded as to bring a great "scare head" into prominent view, and as Adella glanced at the caption, she gave a short, sharp cry of intense anguish.

And well she might! That caption was horrible in its brutality, and none the less so for consisting of barely three words:

ROSS MONTGOMERY ROASTED!

James Gibson snatched the paper away, but instead of swooning, as he fully expected, Adella sat erect, coldly commanding him to explain all.

He tried to temporize, but vainly. She would listen to neither him nor to the kindly house-

keeper, and so the lawyer completed the explanation he had once begun.

"I tried my best to keep the worst from you, dear child, but— Well, even my friendly lie availed nothing! The papers *did* get the name of the second man lost, in the end, but it was so brutal, so coarse, so—"

"Go on. Tell me *all*, or I must go seek the truth in town."

"Rather than that, listen: I spoke of hiring a spy to look up Major Mordaunt. This spy happened to be near when the alarm of fire broke out, and naturally hurried to the scene."

"He knew Sober, and he at once suspected who the other man was, for reasons which I'll explain later on. And he took particular pains to confirm those suspicions. He had a fair view of the man's face, and it undoubtedly was that of Ross Montgomery."

"Where is he—*it*?" asked Adella, in tones so hoarse as to be hardly articulate. "If your spy could recognize his face, how—"

She could not say the words, but a shivering glance toward the paper lying on the floor, pointed her meaning past doubt.

"That was before—before it happened," hastily added the lawyer, now as eager to finish as he had been reluctant to begin. "The fire had gained too great headway to be extinguished. And Solomon Sober—he surely *must* have turned crazy! Sober caught up the insensible body of Montgomery, and dashed straight into the blazing building!"

"Did—Go on, I bid you, man!"

"It's killing the poor darling, you are, sir, and I think you're a perfect brute, so I do!" exploded Mrs. Heaton.

"Go on—go on, I say!"

"There is little more to tell, poor child," his own tones turned husky and far from steady through strong emotion. "They went into that hell of flames, but—neither Sober nor—nor the other, ever came forth again!"

Adella brushed a hand across her face, repeating the action like one dazed and unconscious of her own action. But then, with a wild, piercing shriek of bitterest agony, the poor girl fell again, lying like one suddenly stricken by the hand of death.

Mrs. Heaton gave a scream which brought in the one man-servant kept on the premises, and with his aid Adella was carried up to her chamber. James Gibson lingered until the house-keeper reported her young mistress once more conscious, and rallying, then he took his departure.

"And had luck go with you, as it came!" wished Mrs. Heaton, heartily.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MAJOR ADELBERT MORDAUNT.

"No doubt you think so, officer, but if you will kindly pass my card to Chief Zouche, I rather think he'll find time to make an exception in my case, at least."

Officer Jordan took the bit of pasteboard, at the same time gazing keenly into the face of the gentleman who spoke with such quiet confidence.

It was by no means an unusual type of face, either, barring the luxuriant beard and its rich hue; and red-haired citizens were by far too plentiful in St. Louis for even a member of the police force to extract much information from that peculiarity.

But when Officer Jordan glanced from face to card, he gave a start and an ejaculation, for the name printed thereon was one concerning which every member of the force felt a powerful interest.

"Major Mordaunt!"

"Precisely, my dear fellow," bowed the gentleman. "If you are taken suddenly ill, I'll ask one of these other lads to do my errand."

Jordan gave a nod and a meaning glance toward the officers on duty at the Central Station, then, with card in his hand, hurried to announce the caller to Chief Zouche.

He was absent for hardly more than a minute, during which length of time Major Mordaunt glanced fairly often toward the stalwart policeman who kept between himself and the open entrance.

Evidently they recognized his importance, though after a fashion which could hardly be to him a source of pride.

Major Mordaunt smiled and bowed as Officer Jordan returned with word that Chief Zouche would receive him without delay, but he kept his wits for the head man, and Jordan was obliged to nurse his burning curiosity as best he might, outside that secret-haunted chamber.

If Chief Zouche had exhibited excitement of any description at this voluntary resurrection of the mysterious officer whose identity had so completely baffled the skill of the Metropolitan force, as well as the corps of trained detectives in the employ of the city, he had rallied marvelously, for no man living could have worn a cooler, calmer exterior than he, just then.

"Important business, you directed the officer to say, Major Mordaunt, I think?" he asked, with a glance at the card lying on the desk before him, as though finding it necessary to refresh his memory.

"I consider it such, at least," bowed the caller.

"Pray be seated. My time is pretty fully occupied, just now, but if your business will justify the expenditure, I can give you— How long a time do you wish, sir?"

"Long enough to have you explain why my name, title and description have been flashed all over the country, sir," retorted the other, with a trace of honest indignation in his tones.

"Then you are the Major Mordaunt spoken of by—in connection with the Bainbridge case?" innocently asked Zouche, beaming mildly into that face, but at the same time mentally comparing this with the description given by the two crooks.

"My name is Mordaunt—Adelbert Mordaunt, and I hold a commission as major in the volunteer regiment, sir. I was in town on the night of the killing, and unless there were two gentlemen in St. Louis of that name, I was with the murdered person not so many hours before he was found dead."

"You appear to be pretty well posted, major."

"Why wouldn't I, sir? Haven't the papers been full of the case? Haven't I breakfasted, dined, supped, on their abominable lies and wild exaggerations, until—why, sir, if I hadn't rejected it all, like a seasick land-lubber, I'd be swollen bigger than a—mountain, sir!"

Major Mordaunt appeared to be growing excited, but Chief Zouche took it all with the utmost calmness. His keen, trained eyes were now openly at work, and trying their level best to read what might lie below the surface, while paying due heed to what his caller offered.

Major Mordaunt was not too deeply excited, however, to make this discovery, and breaking short off, he sat in silence until that close inspection came to an end.

Nothing in Zouche's face betrayed what conclusion he had reached, but in the same cool, even tones he asked:

"You have been out of town, I imagine, major?"

"I have, sir. I am on furlough, and merely stopped over in town to call on a couple of friends. Then I resumed my trip home, where I first learned of this infernal mixture of fact and fancy, truth and lies, all stirred up by the imaginative pen and pencil of so many rascally reporters who—beg pardon, sir, but it makes me hot—red-hot!"

Chief Zouche gave a little nod and a vague smile at that outburst.

"I can imagine that, major. I've felt something very much like it, myself, more than once. It's an evil we've got to endure, simply because we can't suppress it. Now—when and where did you separate from Austin Bainbridge, that night?"

A sudden glitter came into those keen eyes as their owner asked this question. If this military hero was really striving to throw more dust over the scent, he would hardly be able to meet this test.

But Major Mordaunt replied without pausing for reflection; and his answer matched perfectly with the statement made by Nipper Noll, on the night of the killing.

Chief Zouche felt annoyed, if not disappointed, but nothing of this was permitted to show itself in his trained countenance.

"You seem fairly familiar with the city, major. May I ask why you took such careful note of the parting place?"

A dry laugh came first, then Mordaunt replied:

"Because neither Bainbridge nor myself happened to have a match about us, just then, sir. I wanted another smoke, and lacking more regular means, I climbed a lamp post, high enough to light a bit of paper at the gas jet. The names of the two streets were painted on the glass, and although I hardly knew it at the time, my brain received an impression which was instantly revived when I saw what an infamous use was being made of my name in connection with the crime."

Once more the major had avoided a snare, though without showing consciousness of its existence. And once more his statement matched perfectly with the information extracted from Nipper Noll and Nosey Clark, while those two gentlemen were undergoing the ordeal of "the sweat-box."

Neither of these two facts had been picked up by the reporters, and if he held no other proof, it was clear the major was no impostor. If one, how could he have learned those seemingly trifling facts?

"Where did you go, after parting with Bainbridge, that night, sir?"

"Direct to the levee, where I boarded the steamboat, Peerless, less than half an hour before she pulled out for her regular trip up the Missouri River. My passage had been taken early that morning. My baggage was aboard. I had only to turn into my berth, and I was soundly asleep before her paddle-wheels began churning. We campaigners learn to sleep fast and soundly, sir."

"And your destination was?"

"The old homestead, sir. My parents are both living, and where ought their soldier-boy—"

beg pardon, but that's what the old folks call me," with a faint laugh and slight bow by way of apology.

"Don't mention it, major. I've not forgotten an old home, although those who built it have long since passed over," gravely spoke Zouche.

"Memory does stick, doesn't it? Well, the old folks live on a farm just outside of Independence, and as you may guess, daily papers are something of a rarity at such a home. And that is why I haven't turned up here at an earlier date, sir."

It was a brisk, off-hand explanation, yet it hardly satisfied Chief Zouche. He could find fault with no particular point, yet his instinct warned him against giving this free-spoken stranger full confidence.

There was a brief silence, during which Major Adelbert Mordaunt seemed waiting for the next question, but instead, Chief Zouche said:

"All this you might easily have picked up through the newspapers, Major Mordaunt. Of course we will require better proof—"

"That's enough, sir," coldly interposed Mordaunt. "I can readily imagine the rest of your speech. I hardly expected a thief-taker to accept the bare word of an officer, and so I pass the insult by. You have only to mention the manner of proof which will satisfy you, and I promise to supply it."

Chief Zouche showed no sign of anger or even annoyance at this rather pointed speech, but tapped the call-bell resting on the desk before him.

The outer door opened, and an officer appeared, escorting Nipper Noll and Nosey Clark. At a nod from the chief, Officer Jordan left the office, closing the door back of the two crooks.

Major Mordaunt glanced carelessly toward the knaves, but showed no signs of uneasiness or even recognition. So far as his appearance went, they might have been utter strangers to him.

But Chief Zouche was watching all three, and he saw the start of recognition given by both Pickett and Clark as their anxious eyes fell upon that strong, erect figure, and red-hued beard.

"I sent for you, lads, to let you take a close look at this gentleman. Take it, and then answer: have you ever met him before now?"

"Yes, sir," slowly, as if reluctantly, answered Nipper Noll. "He's the same gent we saw with the high-roller, that night, sir."

"You are sure? And you, Clark?" persisted Zouche. "Take another look, please, for much may depend on your identification. Are you both perfectly convinced you have made no mistake in the person?"

But the two crooks were not to be shaken now. They fully identified the major, and told where he parted from Austin Bainbridge. Their account tallied perfectly with the statement already made by the red-bearded officer.

A touch of the bell brought Officer Jordan to the threshold, and the witnesses were returned to his care. They passed out of sight, and then Major Mordaunt spoke, for the first time since the surprise was sprung upon him:

"Of course you know your own business best, sir, but if you have any more tests to apply, will you oblige me by hurrying them along? I came here at great personal inconvenience to myself, thinking that a word or two would suffice to clear my record. Now—I'm almost sorry I took so much trouble."

Before Chief Zouche could make answer, a gentle rap came at his office-door, and, crossing the room, he answered the summons. A few low words passed, and closing the door again, he returned to his desk.

"Patience for a minute or two, major, and then I'll try to answer your last question. I find there is a bit of particular business which can hardly be postponed, and—Come in, please!"

The door swung open and a gentleman stepped briskly into the office.

Major Mordaunt turned his head, to meet the startled eyes of James Gibson.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CHIEF, MAJOR, LAWYER, SPY.

A FAINT smile drew fine wrinkles around the keen eyes of Chief Zouche as he watched the two men for an instant before rising from his seat.

He saw Gibson start, and noted the flush which came and went so swiftly, but so far as he could tell in that brief space of time, Major Mordaunt betrayed neither surprise, fear nor recognition.

"I'm heartily glad to see you, Mr. Gibson," he said, with a little wave of his hand as he added:

"Permit me to introduce to you Major Adelbert Mordaunt: major, James Gibson, Esquire."

The major bowed stiffly, without rising from his seat, but Gibson flushed hotly, his eyes glowing as he impetuously exclaimed:

"That devil! And here—without irons on his wrists?"

Chief Zouche smiled more positively, but Major Mordaunt proved fully equal to the occasion, his brows arching as his gaze reverted to the chief, with the cold query:

"Is this the crazy ward, your Honor?"

"No; but I firmly believe you are the rascal who killed Austin Bainbridge!" hotly cried the lawyer, before Zouche could reply.

"Indeed?" drawlingly uttered Mordaunt, his cool gaze coming back to that strongly excited face. "Swear out a warrant for my arrest, then, if you have faith in your own words, but, take this warning in advance: unless you can fully prove such a charge, I'll make you sweat blood by way of damages, sir!"

Despite his outward show of coolness, it was evident that Major Mordaunt was likewise growing hot, and as James Gibson seemed nothing loth to join issue, then and there, it really looked as though a personal contest might come next.

But, of course, Chief Zouche could not submit to anything of the sort, and though he doubtless felt that a collision between two such men, both thoroughly excited, and so evenly matched to all seeming, would be a rare spectacle to witness, he promptly interfered.

"You must settle your quarrel outside, if at all, gentlemen. This meeting comes totally unexpected to me. I had no idea that Major Mordaunt would put in an appearance, when I sent you word, Gibson."

"Is he under arrest, sir?" asked the lawyer.

"No. If I see the necessity for that, of course I will not shrink from doing my duty as a sworn officer of the law. But let that point pass for the present."

"I sent for you, simply because I am too rushed with business just now to stand on ceremony. As the attorney engaged to represent Ross Montgomery, you are entitled to know what movements take place in relation to that case."

"Unless this person—"

"Wait, please. Ross Montgomery is gone, either escaped or dead. Good security has been pledged as guarantee that the two most important witnesses, Pickett and Clark, will be on hand promptly, if the case should ever come to trial."

Major Mordaunt gave a restless movement, and Chief Zouche glanced his way, inquiringly.

"What is it, major?"

"Am I obliged to waste further time here, sir? Although you may not fully appreciate that fact, I have other and more important business on hand."

The chief smiled faintly, though he gave an apologetic bow before saying:

"There are times, my dear major, when we all have to yield precedence to the law. Your coming—"

"Was purely voluntary, sir, on my part. I came here to avenge many personal insults, not to meekly submit to still others of the same description."

"I have given you a truthful explanation of what called me out of town, on that particular night. You have my card, on the back of which is penciled my present address. If you see fit to do so, you can place me under arrest, although I tell you frankly that I mean to extract full and complete amends from all who even try to cast obloquy upon my father's name, as well as upon the uniform I am proud to wear."

"I fear you are permitting your wrath to run away with your usual clear judgment, my dear major," suavely spoke Zouche.

"I am cool enough to know my rights, sir, and bold enough to maintain them, against even an official of your lofty station," bluntly declared the soldier, matching that bow with one even deeper.

"Will you kindly permit me to finish what I was saying to this gentleman, major?"

"Since you make the request, as from one gentleman to another, sir, I will wait," coldly said Mordaunt, but leaving his chair, to cross the room and gaze with superficial interest at a picture suspended from the wall.

Showing no particular sign of annoyance at such cavalier treatment, Chief Zouche quietly picked up the thread of his remarks where broken off, adding:

"As I was saying, Mr. Gibson, ample bail has been deposited for the prompt appearance of both Pickett and Clark, in case their testimony should ever be called for."

"It surely will be, unless—nothing more has been heard, sir?"

"Concerning Ross Montgomery, you mean?"

"Of course. I know what the reports are, but somehow I can't really think it's gone that way!"

"You mean?"

"I believe that a terrible mistake has been made, but—"

Gibson cut his own speech short, with a meaningful glance toward the broad back of Major Mordaunt, whose attention appeared wholly absorbed by the details of that picture on the wall.

But as that break came, the soldier turned abruptly, gazing coldly upon the other gentlemen. His action could not well be misunderstood.

If Gibson was afraid to speak openly in his presence, it was hardly the proper thing for an officer to give even the ghost of a chance to the

lawyer for even thinking he was trying to play eavesdropper.

Chief Zouche waited a little for the lawyer to complete his sentence, but as Gibson showed no sign of such an intention, he spoke in his turn:

"There can be no fault found with the security offered, Gibson, and, of course, I could hardly refuse to accept it, under the circumstances. I did accept it, and the two rascals have already been released from arrest."

"They will be kept track of, as a matter of course, and they have promised to report at one of the stations, at least once in each and every twenty-four hours."

"Still, I thought it nothing more than right to give you timely warning of my decision, so that you could take other steps to place them in limbo, if you really think it worth while."

"I don't know as I could, but—"

"Oh, as for that, my dear fellow, it's easy enough to find a plausible charge which will lay them both by the heels."

"I started to say, sir, that if you are perfectly satisfied they will be on hand when wanted—"

"To convict, or to clear poor Montgomery?" cut in Major Mordaunt, with a sneering look back of his query, which neither of the two others could mistake.

"To clear poor Montgomery, sir, by telling the simple truth, not the infernal pack of lies which a still viler rascal placed in their mouths!" sternly retorted the lawyer, his eyes aglow.

"Peace, I beg of you, gentlemen!" interposed Zouche.

"Then let this fellow—"

"This gentleman, fellow!" sharply retorted Mordaunt, then turning upon the chief, he said, coldly: "You have my address, sir. If this person wishes or thinks wise to press his dispute with me, you are at perfect liberty to give it to him."

"And now, as I have finished saying what I came here to utter, my present business is at an end. I came of my free will, and I am going after the same manner. If you care to risk checking me, sir, of course you understand what steps to take first."

Without pausing for a reply, Major Mordaunt crossed the room to the door, opening it, then pausing for a single backward glance before passing through the portal.

No word was uttered to check his retreat, nor did the more than half-expected signal come for an officer to bar his way.

Major Mordaunt, with a soldierly stride and swing of his erect body, passed through the main room, paying no attention to the curious looks which the few policemen there gave him.

He glanced coolly around, taking note of everything, even though few would have thought as much. And among other items were the pale, half-frightened face of Nipper Noll, and the wide eyes of his pal, Nosey Clark.

Leaving the Central, Major Mordaunt walked briskly for a short distance, but then, as though the crisp, fresh air was gradually soothing his irritated feelings, his strides grew shorter, and his heels beat a less rapid tattoo on the stone flagging.

He appeared to have no particular destination in view, and after a brief pause where he was sheltered from the brisk breeze, barely long enough to strike a match and light a cigar taken from his case, he once more strolled onward, chest thrown forward, head erect, the beau ideal of a military man.

He seemed to be in no particular haste, nor to have any especial point in view, strolling leisurely along with the outward seeming of one perfectly satisfied with himself and the world in general.

But with all this seeming carelessness of what might be going on about him, few men among the multitude hurrying in all directions up and down those streets through which his idle steps led him, were more busily thinking, or more deeply interested in the success of the plan which he had shaped even before leaving the police-station.

At each corner he turned (and these were neither few nor far between), Major Mordaunt twisted his eyes to right or left without actually turning his head perceptibly, sending keen, searching glances back along the course he had followed since his last turning.

He was looking for a spy, one at least of which he felt morally certain was, or soon would be, upon his trail.

He had taken note of the scared look upon the swarthy face of Nipper Noll, and believed that the crook would be anxious to learn more concerning the gentleman before whom he had so unexpectedly been brought by Chief Zouche.

And then a low chuckle moved his beard, as he made the discovery.

"Taken the bait, so soon, my dear fellow? Anxious to learn more of Major Adelbert Mordaunt, are you? Well, I'm betting long odds I could lay hand upon his shoulder in less than half an hour from now!"

CHAPTER XXV.

PLAYING WITH A SHADOW.

ALTHOUGH he had long felt fairly confident some such move would be attempted, the major

had only now made the discovery for which he had been waiting.

Whether it was because that long, doubling stroll had wearied both his limbs and his patience, or because he had only recently struck the scent, Nipper Noll was recognized by those aslant glances, and toward Nipper Noll those grimly facetious words were directed.

Evidently Major Mordaunt was not one to take anything for granted when a little additional trouble might place it beyond the possibility of a doubt, for instead of slackening his pace when he made this recognition, or of turning about to meet the pickpocket face to face, he strode along more briskly, quickening his movements and lengthening his stride in proportion.

Now, as from the first, he turned corners frequently, like one whose main intention was to obtain as much exercise as possible, without making too great progress in a direct line.

This was kept up, with guarded glances back at each turning, until Major Mordaunt felt fully assured that he was being shadowed by Nipper Noll. If not, the crook would never have imitated his turns and windings so faithfully.

With that point fairly settled to his satisfaction, Major Mordaunt paused abruptly, drawing forth and consulting a watch, as though reminded of an appointment of some description. From one corner of his eye he saw the pickpocket coming closer, but he did not face that way, or make a movement which could frighten the shadow off his track.

Only noting the distance between them, Major Mordaunt started off at a brisk pace, like one who finds time is limited, but when he turned the next corner, it was to stop short, facing about, a bland smile upon his red-bearded face.

Nipper Noll came hurrying up, and stepping quickly forward at the same time, the military gentleman said:

"Since you appear to be walking my way, Mr. Pickett, why not?"

He slipped a hand through the surprised pickpocket's arm before Nipper Noll could hinder, and holding him with a firm though veiled grip, Major Mordaunt resumed his stroll, speaking in affable tones:

"Head up, chest out, come as near aping the gentleman as you know how, Friend Nipper. But, above all things, don't think to play mule, or I'll transfer you to the first cop we come across, on charge of picking my pockets!"

"I never—I didn't— Holy thunder!" stammered the surprised crook, a little shiver passing through the arm which Major Mordaunt was holding, telling how strongly its owner was tempted to break away and seek safety in flight.

"Don't try anything of the sort, Oliver," coolly interpreted his captor. "It would be worse than foolish on your part. In the first place, you couldn't get away without leaving this arm behind you, and that might be painful to you, and disagreeable to myself."

"Secondly, why should you wish to shake a gentleman you've been so industriously shadowing for the better part of an hour? Particularly when he's just on the point of— Hiding is cheaper than walking, my dear Noll, so long as you let the other fellow foot the bill!"

Major Mordaunt had signaled a hack, and as it drew up close to the curb, he opened the door and deftly sent Nipper Noll in first.

"Just exercise your horses, driver, until I give you more explicit directions," the major said, with a wink which the hackman answered, in kind. "Of course you needn't carry us quite to Carondelet, nor yet over to East St. Louis. Just take a saunter, you comprehend?"

Entering the carriage, Major Mordaunt took a seat opposite Nipper Noll, whose swarthy face showed a sickly yellow in the light that came through the glass windows, and whose black eyes held a half-puzzled, half-hunted light which was hardly nice to see.

"What sort o' rig is this you're tryin' to put up on a cove, I'd like to know, sir?" he asked, in tones far from being steady.

"Of course you've done nothing to deserve it, Mr. Pickett?"

"I don't know what you mean, but—I want out!"

"I prefer you inside, for the present," coolly retorted the major, one of his firm hands touching Nipper Noll's arm as the frightened crook made a movement toward opening the door. "Still, if you're dead-set on jumping out, yonder is a cop, and I'll have him give you the collar, too quick!"

"What for? What have I done that you—"

"Even worse than you are doing now, and that is needless. This is only foolishness, but then—you infernal dog!" with fierce emphasis, adding weight to his low-pitched tones. "What excuse can you offer for that? How can you even try to explain your selling me out?"

Nipper Noll shrunk away as far as those contracted limits would permit, shivering in fright, yet with that puzzled expression growing stronger upon his face.

"I don't—I never—"

Major Mordaunt deftly spread a broad palm across those blanched lips, sternly uttering:

"Speak when you are spoken to, Pickett, and then you needn't try to open the roof of the hack with your lungs. Now, since you seem unable to catch on, I'll try once more.

"Of course I'm not blaming you for what happened when the chief brought you and Nosey in for a look at me; that I was fully prepared for, even if you fellows weren't. And you caught on to my sign without much trouble.

"Of course old Zouche noticed you start and bleach out, but I reckon he gave that weakness the interpretation best for our side. And so, as I said, I'm not blaming you for that part of the job; but why under the canopy didn't you pass the word when that infernal fraud came in?"

Nipper Noll stared bewilderedly at the speaker, but gave no answer, either in words or in gesture.

"Of course I was on guard, in a place like that, but nervy as I think I've proved myself too often for blushing at making such a claim, you nearly put me in a bad box! I'd rather have met the devil himself, than that hound! And you let him jump in on me, without word, sign or sound, Brother Pickett!"

Nipper Noll gave a low cry at that title, and seemed even more bewildered than before. Almost unconsciously he gave the sign by which members of that illegal band might recognize each other, and it was instantly answered by Major Mordaunt.

"I didn't—I thought—" stammered the pickpocket, staring affrightedly into that thickly-bearded face, even yet unable to clear his bemused wits, which seemed to become more hopelessly tangled up with each moment that passed them by.

A low laugh, tinged with bitter mockery escaped those other lips.

"You thought *he* was *me*, eh? You mixed the babies up, then couldn't tell 'em apart when you wanted to? And, to make matters still more interesting, you gave *him* the hint that should by rights have come *my* way ahead of him!"

"But I thought—how could I even guess, when—Cursed if I don't begin to think I've got 'em again! And got 'em terribly bad, too!"

Nipper Noll gave a gesture of angry disgust as he uttered those words, and his whole action was enough to draw a smile to the face of the major; despite his just cause for frowning, instead.

"He played it mighty fine, of course, but that's a way he has, as no man in St. Louis has a better right to know than your particular self, Nipper Noll. How much did you let leak? What did you tell him? Surely you never gave him the sign you've just made me?"

Nipper Noll gave a start, turning a shade paler, though that seemed hardly possible an instant before. The hunted expression came back to his eyes, and one hand involuntarily moved toward the door-fastening, as though the pickpocket was again meditating a breakaway.

Major Mordaunt quietly but firmly pushed that member back, at the same time speaking:

"That wish is more for your own benefit than mine, or the rest of the lads, Pickett. You know the laws: if a brother comes to grief through his own blind faults, he must hoe his own row as best he can.

"It was a neat get-up, I'm free to admit, but you had no right to take everything for granted, as I'm beginning to fear you must have done. And so I ask you again: how much did you leak?"

Nipper Noll made no reply, in words. He cowered there in his corner, sullenly silent. Right or wrong, he was beginning to suspect that he had fallen into a dangerous snare.

"Because, if you *did* let drop too broad a hint, my dear fellow, the odds are heavy that your name will have to be changed from Nipper Noll to Noll Nipped, or I don't know Old Sobersides!"

"He isn't—you can't mean it, sir?" quavered the pickpocket, his whole frame aquiver at mention of that dreaded title.

Major Mordaunt gave a low, bitter laugh before replying:

"How can I help meaning it, Pickett? And that's why I said, what I'll say over again: it's a case of mixing the twins all up in a heap! You took me for what I showed on the surface, but when he put in an appearance, you kicked the fat into the fire, like an infernal idiot, instead of one worthy to belong to our family!

"Why did you do it? What did you say to him? Did you really make such a dangerous blunder, Pickett?"

Only a low, inarticulate sound came from the crook, and he sat staring with frightened eyes at the person seated opposite.

"Talk out, man! Seeing 'twas such a close make-up on his part, I can partially excuse you for mistaking the imitation for the original. I can see how you might well grow confused at seeing me, as you thought, in my proper person, while at the same time you knew I was in with the chief, playing Major Mordaunt. But since your own eyes must have warned you there was trickery going on, you surely wasn't idiot enough to give yourself wholly away, by giving that fraud the Brotherhood sign?"

Still there came no reply, and Nipper Noll betrayed his growing terror still more eloquently in face, eyes and person.

For a gentleman with so peppery a temper as he had that day exhibited in the office of Chief Zouche, Major Mordaunt showed extraordinary patience with this intractable subject, time and again returning to the charge, seemingly resolved on extorting a full if not free confession from the quivering lips of the pickpocket.

"You can't blind your eyes to the blunt facts any longer, Nipper Noll, so where's the sense in trying? That was Solomon Sober, playing the part of—well, of James Gibson," with a short, hard laugh.

"I've all along doubted the truth of the report which said he had perished in the flames of his house, that night, but *now*—well, your own eyes ought to be good enough witnesses, Pickett!"

With a low, growling cry of angry terror, the pickpocket sprung for the door, but only to have arm and throat grasped by Major Mordaunt.

CHAPTER XXVI.

HOW NIPPER NOLL WAS NIPPED

ALTHOUGH the crook was wiry and active as a cat, with an energy lent him by a sense of being entrapped, he proved little better than a child in that strong grip, and Major Mordaunt pushed him back in his corner, sternly saying:

"Quiet, you fool! Quiet, I say, or you'll fare a mighty sight worse!"

"I don't—Let me out!"

"You couldn't outrun a bullet, Pickett, so where's the sense in your trying to break away like this? I know you're hardly worth a cartridge, but I'd certainly spoil one in checking your flight, if you happened to break away."

Calmly, smoothly Major Mordaunt spoke, but there was something in his tones which cowed Nipper Noll, even more effectually than if the loudest threats had been called into play. He shivered as he sat in a limp heap opposite this soldier, and for the time being he certainly was in no condition for either a struggle or a foot-race.

The major leaned forward to give a couple of sharp raps against the glass just back of the hackman, who evidently comprehended the instructions contained in that signal, for he quickened the pace of his team, turning the next corner and hastening to the destination agreed upon before that aimless drive began.

"You needn't mind about asking questions, Nipper Noll," his captor calmly said, answering that half-appealing look. "If you want to know what I mean, it is just this: I wanted you, and I've got you.

"We're going to leave the hack in a minute or so, but if you are foolish enough to think you can escape by breaking away, let me warn you in advance just how that will end. I'm not in the humor for a foot-race, this morning, but I'm not going to lose the prize I've taken so much trouble to trap.

"If you try a break, I'll try a shot, and if I have to do that, I'll shoot to kill, not merely to cripple. Now, take your choice: go decently along with me, or say your prayers while you've time enough left to rattle them off."

Major Mordaunt gave another rap on the glass, and the driver drew his team in close to the curb.

Opening the door, the major stepped out, reaching a hand to assist his unwilling companion to alight. And as Nipper Noll's feet struck the pavement, a strong hand was slipped through his arm, and with a nod toward the grinning hackman, Major Mordaunt moved briskly down the street, turning the next corner.

As he did this, the major glanced keenly backward, but he saw nothing which could arouse even a suspicion of their being shadowed, and since he knew the hackman would have given him warning had he seen any such signs during that intricate drive, he felt fairly well assured that only Nipper Noll had been placed upon his track.

His mind set at rest on this point, the captor led his captive directly to a plain, old-fashioned house which stood a little back from the street, the front door of which opened instantly after his rap gave warning of his coming.

Nipper Noll gave a gasping sound of terror as he caught sight of the woman's face before them, and he made a desperate effort to break away, only to find himself foiled. He was almost flung through the opening, and his captor instantly followed after, saying:

"It's all right, Hannah. Admit no one, without first letting me know what they look like, of course."

Another frightened sound came from the pickpocket at mention of that name, but he was helpless as a child in the powerful grip of his captor, who deftly tripped his legs from under him, bringing him to the floor on the broad of his back, a heavy knee pressing into his stomach as strong hands brought his wrists together, closing a pair of handcuffs about them, the wristlets being connected by a strong bar of iron or steel.

Without a trace of surprise or emotion, the woman called Hannah, gave such aid as was necessary, supplying both bar-cuffs and, later, a thick bandage which was tied firmly around Nipper Noll's head, completely closing his eyes to the light.

"If you try to squeal before I say talk, Pickett, I'll simply add a gag to the rest," coolly declared the captor, then glancing up to give Hannah a nod, which sent that remarkable woman quickly if not lightly up the stairs to the upper story.

Moving more leisurely, Major Mordaunt picked up his captive, placing him upon his feet; but only for an instant.

Nipper Noll was so completely unnerved by what had happened him, as to be hardly able to support his own weight, much less climb stairs.

"Well, since you've turned too weak to walk, reckon I'll have to treat you as a little kid, my fine fellow," declared the other, with a short, dry chuckle. "It's disgracing the uniform, rather, to turn its honorable wearer into a pack-mule for a cur, but—steady, now! If you try to kick, I'll not insure you against a break-neck tumble down the stairs, my covey!"

With apparent ease, Nipper Noll was lifted to one muscular shoulder and borne lightly to the upper floor, where Hannah was standing at a half-opened door. At a nod from her brother, this was swung wide, and passing into the chamber beyond, the detective placed his prisoner in a chair which stood near one side of the room.

"You can go, now, Hannah," said Old Sobersides, for the first time dropping that feigned voice which had served him so well of late. "You know what steps to take, in case anything should happen?"

"Of course I do," coldly replied Hannah, leaving the room and shutting the door behind her.

Thus left alone with his captive, Solomon Sober drew a chair in front of his blindfolded captive, seating himself and leisurely filling his little black pipe, setting the tobacco well alight before taking any further steps.

Although still wearing the uniform and false hair which, aided by his cool wit and strong nerves, had enabled him to carry on such a daring deception so long, the expression of his face had altered fully as much as had his voice.

Chief Zouche would instantly have recognized his favorite detective, could he have seen him thus, but with no eyes to take notes, and fully ready to let Nipper Noll know him as he really was, Old Sobersides could well afford to be himself again.

"Now, Pickett, we're going to have a bit of a chat, you and I," he began, speaking coolly and easily. "You seemed tongue-tied down yonder in the hack, but I reckon that was mainly because you couldn't fairly make up your mind as to just who you were in company with.

"All that has changed now. I'm Solomon Sober, just as sure as you are Nipper Noll, the light-fingered. You want liberty, and I'm the only man living who can give you that. I want information, and if you're not the only human pump in town, you're the one most convenient to my grip, and that sort of evens it up.

"Now, first thing: what did you say to Jim Gibson, back at the Central, to scare him so mightily when he came face to face with me in the chief's office?"

Old Sobersides paused for an answer, but it failed to come. Nipper Noll was shivering like one under an ague chill, but not a sound was permitted to pass his tight-closed lips.

"Well, I'll come at you again, Olly, dear," smoothly spoke the Old-Style Detective, without betraying his irritation in his voice. "You may not have said so mighty much to his royal ribs, but you surely gave him some sort of warning. Was it through the signs of the Brotherhood of Bullet and Steel, Pickett?"

Still a dogged silence. Either Nipper Noll was afraid to speak, or he had resolved to keep silence through dread of making a bad situation just so much the worse.

Old Sobersides waited for a full minute, but as no answer came at the end of that period, he leaned forward and took possession of one of the pickpocket's hands, closing thumb and forefinger upon one of those slender digits, gradually increasing the pressure while speaking:

"Don't be all fool, Pickett. I'm bound to have the whole truth out of you, if I have to turn myself into a completely furnished torture-chamber, such as the old-time Inquisition—*Did I hurt you, man?*"

Nipper Noll gave a howl of pain as that remorseless pressure was steadily increased. He was not made of such stuff as martyrs are composed of, and broke down far more quickly than Old Sobersides had dared hope.

"Out with it, then, my dear fellow: you recognized James Gibson as one of the Brotherhood, of course?"

Pickett broke into a storm of denials and protestations. He knew nothing whatever concerning any such league as Old Sobersides mentioned, nor had he in any manner warned Gibson of—

"I asked you for truth, not lies, Pickett," coldly interposed the detective. "I hold proof positive that you are a member of the Brotherhood of Bullet and Steel. I knew that

Gibson is high in that devilish gang. I'll have the plain truth out of you, or you'll never see the light of day again! Still, I'll leave that particular point for a while and ask you something else:

"Did Gibson order you to shadow me?"

"No, sir," huskily replied the pickpocket. "I just—I reckoned I might make a little stake by hunting you up, and so I—so help me, sir, that's all!" shrinking nervously as that powerful hand once more closed upon his own.

"Make a stake, you say? How were you going to do that?"

"Well, sir, I'll be frank with you, rather than suffer any more—don't do it, I beg! Then—didn't I help clear you to Chief Zouche, sir? Didn't I swear that you never harmed the sport?"

"And James Gibson had nothing whatever to do with your playing spy on me, Pickett?"

"Nothing, sir, hope may die if he did! I just reckoned maybe you'd give me a dollar or two, for swearing you clear, and so—"

"Did the real Major Mordaunt need such swearing, Pickett? Don't you know that he killed Austin Bainbridge?"

Sharply these questions came, but instead of being surprised into making full confession as Sober hoped, Nipper Noll lapsed into sullen silence once more, after doggedly swearing he had told the whole truth when first arrested.

Old Sobersides tried his thumb-screw once more, but while the luckless crook groaned and writhed in his pain, never a word more could be extracted from his lips.

Equally in vain did Old Sobersides vary his questions; all were unanswered, and growing weary of his tortures, the detective finally abandoned them, for the present at least.

"All right, Nipper Noll, if you only think so. You've lived a fool, and you'll die an ass! I gave you a chance, but you've flung it over your shoulder. Now—I'll give you time to chew the cud of bitter fancy!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

SOLOMON IS HIMSELF AGAIN.

NIPPER NOLL uttered a cry of terrified appeal as those strong arms closed about his person, but Old Sobersides paid no heed to his affright, nor wasted further time in trying for a confession.

Picking his prisoner up much as though handling a bale of no very precious merchandise, the Old-Style Detective bore him from that room, into another on the same level. Here he opened a closet with his free hand, swinging the door back as far as it would go, to enable him to see what he was about.

Unceremoniously dumping Nipper Noll upon the floor, Sober took a heavy leather belt, such as was worn by Federal infantry, from where it hung from a nail, together with other equipment.

Adjusting this snugly to the pickpocket's dimensions, he buckled it in place about Nipper Noll's waist. Then he passed one end of a stout dog-chain under the belt at Pickett's back, completing his fastenings by snapping the strong catch into a ring-bolt screwed close up against the rear wall of the closet.

Frightened nearly out of his senses, Nipper Noll begged for mercy, as well as he was able, but Old Sobersides gave him no heed, just then, silently and rapidly going about his work, ending all by deftly forcing a snug gag between the prisoner's jaws, binding it fast back of his neck.

"You had your chance, Pickett, and threw it over your shoulder. I gave you more time than I could well afford to waste on such an obstinate rascal, but it did no good. Now, fall to thinking, old man, and make up your mind whether it isn't worth telling the whole truth, by the time I come back to you. That may be in an hour, or it may not be until to-morrow. But when I do come, I'll not argue the case with you, of that you can rest assured."

Of course Nipper Noll could make no reply, in words, and Old Sobersides did not wait to study his writhings or his muffled groans. As he said, he had already wasted too much time with the pickpocket.

Closing the door, but leaving the narrow ventilator just over the casing a little ajar, Old Sobersides turned the key and took it with him as he left the chamber.

He passed directly back to the room in which he had attempted to extort a confession from Nipper Noll, but betrayed no signs of surprise or uneasiness to find that same chair occupied.

"Well, what luck, my dear sir?" asked the young man, rising to his feet as the detective came into the room.

"Not all it should be, by rights, son, but too good for dampening our eyes over, I reckon," quietly replied Sober, closing the chamber door.

"You have learned something, though?"

"Something, but not everything. Try to keep the cork in, son, until I can get out of this rig. It pinches me, and makes me more'n half believe I'm a girl, caught in her first corset!"

Old Sobersides unbuttoned his military coat and vest, giving a long breath of relief as he removed the garments. Then, passing over to

the washstand, above which hung an oval mirror, he removed the remainder of his disguise, which consisted of false beard, a wig, colored brows, and an artificial complexion to match.

To do this, the detective was forced to call upon sundry aids taken from the drawer in the washstand, for too much had depended upon his venture to risk loss or disarrangement of any portion of his make-up through a possible struggle.

While his friend was thus employed, Ross Montgomery watched him closely, even then marveling over the skill which could so completely alter the facial expression of a man whose personality was so marked.

"It proved a success, then, Mr. Sober?" he asked, unable to keep entire silence with such burning interests at stake. "You were not detected by any one?"

"Not until I cared to show my hand a bit," with one of his peculiar chuckles, forming a comical contrast to his wry grimace as the closely-gummed beard threatened to bring skin with it. "And if I hadn't gained anything else, I've got the laugh on Chief Zouche! He eyed me keener than a hungry crow, but he couldn't see more than I offered him."

"You were not entirely unsuccessful, then?" ventured Montgomery.

"Ouch! confound—Don't make me talk while—Time enough when Solomon is himself again, son!"

That did not mean a very tedious wait, once that clinging beard was removed. Water, soap, brisk rubbing; then, with the exception of the odd-looking fringe of beard which he usually wore, Old Sobersides was once more himself, and plainly glad to get out of that disguise.

"Feels mighty good, too!" he declared, giving himself a brisk shake, as though to fairly settle himself into his own skin once more. "It was a pretty get-up, considering I had just one glance by lamplight to pattern after; so pretty that it really ought to have brought bigger profits, all things considered."

"You say no one penetrated your disguise, though?"

"No one did, but I hoped a great deal more than that from it, son. It brought me one bird, but crooked chance sent the wrong one after me, and I had to take it, or come back empty-handed."

"Mrs. Hannah hustled me out of the way so briskly that I hadn't anything like a chance to find out what was in the wind. You brought home some person, though, didn't you?"

"Nipper Noll."

"What! Then we'll force the true story from—"

"That's heap sight easier to say than to do, my boy," quietly interrupted the Old-Style Detective. "I took a bit of a turn at the pump, but never brought up a drop of good water!"

"If he knows—and he surely must! If he knows who killed Austin Bainbridge, he must confess, or I'll tear his tongue out by the roots!"

"Steady, son! Now you're going flatly back on the promise you gave me, after our racket at the old den, if I'd let you stay and see the game played out."

"Will it ever be?"

"It's got to come, son, and I was hoping to finish fetching it our way this very night. You know what I said: that if I could pass muster at the Central, in my new rig, without detection, the rest would be easy enough?"

"I remember, but—" and Montgomery glanced toward the discarded disguise with a meaning gesture which completed his sentence.

"Just so: it let me pass the police, it fooled Chief Zouche, and gave Nipper Noll, with his pal, Nosey Clark, one of the nastiest shocks of their lives. But then crooked luck had to bring the one man in all St. Louis whom I had best reasons for avoiding while so rigged out!"

"What do you mean by that, Mr. Sober?" asked Montgomery, his face turning paler, his eyes growing doubly anxious as the detective scowled darkly.

"Never mind, just now, son," said Sober, rallying instantly. "I'll tell you, though, what I did mean, and that was to learn the whole truth this very night!"

"And now?"

"Wait. Before actually risking my life on the disguise, yonder, I thought best to test it among those who knew Solomon Sober best. To do this, I paid a visit to the Central, gave Jordan my card, as Major Adelbert Mordaunt, and then had a long chatter with Chief Zouche concerning the Bainbridge case."

"And he never detected you, sir?"

"If he did, he kept the knowledge mighty close, and is a better actor than I proved myself. He had the two crooks fetched in, and I passed safely through all that. Nipper Noll gave me the Brotherhood sign, but I was too wary to answer it, with the chief's eyes on me."

"So far, everything seemed floating my way, and I felt chipper as a bird in springtime! But then—Well, Lawyer Gibson had to put in his appearance, and as he caught sight of me: red beard, uniform, military carriage and all: you might have knocked him down with a feather!"

"He tried to conceal it, for I'm thinking Nipper Noll must have given him at least a hint,

while passing through the outer room. But he betrayed himself, sure as pigs like little apples!"

"Maybe he recognized you, sir?"

"If so, 'twas simply because he knew there couldn't well be two Major Adelbert Mordaunts, and he knew where the original Jacobs was, too mighty well to think for an instant he stood before him then."

Ross Montgomery was deeply interested, beyond a doubt, but nevertheless he could not refrain from shaking his head, at that speech.

"You think he is the man, sir, but—how can that be?"

"I do think James Gibson is the original Major Mordaunt, and before the curtain falls on the last act, you'll be of the same opinion, son!"

"If you are so positive, sir, why not cause his arrest?"

"Well, thinking is not knowing, and belief, no matter how sincere it may be, will hardly be accepted as positive proof. If I couldn't see a better chance, of course I'd take the chances, and arrest Gibson. But to do that, then fail to make the charge stick, would be to lose all the ground I've won so far, and a mighty sight more on top of that!"

Montgomery bowed his head, in silence. He had suffered far more than he could have believed mortal man able to bear without giving way entirely. And by no means the lightest part of his torment lay in this enforced inaction.

If he could only be up and doing!

Old Sobersides cast a sympathizing glance that way, but was too shrewd to comment on that dejection, continuing, almost as though communing with himself:

"He rallied quick enough, and tried a bluff or two, of course. I'll give him what credit is his due: he's a gritty devil, and will never know he's licked so long as he can hit back."

"He sent Nipper Noll to shadow me, and that makes me all the more sure Gibson is the man we've got to down the hardest."

"You may be right, sir, yet I find it almost impossible to think that way," said Montgomery, rallying once more.

"It does your faith in humanity credit, son, but—well, it hardly increases my respect for your knowledge of human nature, all the same," retorted the detective.

"If James Gibson didn't know who the original major was, and feel dead sure he couldn't be the person he met with Chief Zouche, why was he taken so flatly aback? Why did he send Nipper Noll to play spy?"

"To make sure the major didn't lose himself again, perhaps."

"That might be the answer, only Gibson had to give Noll the hint before seeing the major," quickly retorted Old Sobersides. "I left the office before he did, and Nipper Noll showed fear and amazement in his face and eyes. Why was that, when he unquestioningly accepted me as Mordaunt only a few minutes earlier? Because, on seeing Gibson enter the station, he knew there was another Richmond in the field!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

EAGER FOR THE TEST.

OLD SOBERSIDES leaned back in his chair, chuckling like one who knows he has made an important point.

Ross Montgomery seemed to realize as much, too, for a keen, almost fierce light leaped into his black eyes, and his sinewy hands clinched tightly as they lay in his lap.

"You begin to see through the hole in the ladder, son?" half-mockingly asked the Old-Style Detective. "Well, better late than never, I've heard say, and I reckon I'll fetch you around to my point of view in ample time for performing your share of the work."

"That is just what I'm hungry for, sir!" eagerly said Montgomery. "Give me something to do! Let me feel that I am doing something, no matter how little, just so it's work—work—work!"

"Well, I reckon you'll have your share before long, my boy. James Gibson will hardly let the grass grow under his feet until he knows just what this little matter of to-day amounts to. And when he learns just what was found at the old den, this morning, he'll have mighty little trouble in deciding who was playing one of his pet characters to-day."

"What was found? You mean—"

"That the owner of my old residence is anxious to rebuild, and having settled with the insurance company, he has set about removing the rubbish. Early this morning his workmen struck my little mole-hole, through which I carried you, that night, to the stables!"

Ross Montgomery asked no questions. As a matter of course he was perfectly familiar with the manner in which Old Sobersides had given both friends and enemies the slip, that eventful night, and now the patient reader is equally well informed.

Now that the young man was beginning to share Sober's suspicions against James Gibson, he had fresh cause for uneasiness. Not on his own account, though that might well have troubled him, but just now his thoughts and fears were given to Adella Palmer.

"If you are right, and Gibson is really the

arch-villain, can't something be done? Think of poor Adella, and how—"

"How much are you willing to risk, son?" gravely asked the detective, keenly watching that agitated face the while.

"On her account? Anything—everything!"

"Even your life?"

"Yes. Only show me how I can serve or guard her, and I'll do the work, even though I know it will cost me my life."

Steadily, calmly came that reply, as though Montgomery knew the slightest trace of excitement or wildness would bar him out. And Old Sobersides gave an approving nod as he sat watching.

"You'll do, with a bit more coaching, my son. Ah, if you were only content to live an old bachelor, and would let me teach you, what a way up hand you would make, in the end!"

Despite his intense anxiety, Montgomery gave a faint smile at this touch of professional enthusiasm, so characteristic of the detective.

"Of course, I can't expect you'll give me my wish, son, and I'm not so mighty sure it is a wish, after all, come to look back!" with just the faintest ghost of a sigh that told how far back his memory was turning. "But this isn't business, and there's a powerful lot of work to do if we're to come out on top o' the heap!"

"I gave you one reason why I thought it best to test my new disguise on the keenest eyes I knew of in all St. Louis; now I'll tell you just how I meant to act, later."

"I believe James Gibson is the chief of this League of Bullet and Steel, at least so far as the St. Louis branch is concerned. I firmly believe this, and have so believed for nearly three months past; but as yet I've been unable to pick up proofs enough to justify me in risking an arrest."

"For one thing, I'd picked up hints which led me to fix on the Brotherhood the instant I knew Austin Bainbridge was murdered. And knowing that was one strong life removed from between Gibson and a great fortune, my suspicions naturally turned his way, at once."

"I believed, too, that this Major Mordaunt did the killing, and as both Pickett and Clark, who certainly belong to the Brotherhood, took such great pains to declare him innocent, I just as naturally set him down as a member, either as Mordaunt, or, which I deemed most likely, another fellow who took that rig-out as a convenient disguise."

"Now, you can see how I intended to act: to go as Major Mordaunt right into the midst of the gang, trusting to win clear myself, and to bring with me positive knowledge of how and by whose hand poor Bainbridge met his death."

"Looking it all over, 'twas a very pretty little trick, and could hardly have failed of success, had I been lucky enough to get out of meeting Gibson, just as we did meet. That, of course, knocks this idea on the head."

"Gibson will pass the word, even if he don't call a meeting to post all the gang. They'd be so keenly on the alert that no one of my size or build could possibly pass without dangerous questioning."

Ross Montgomery had been listening closely, strong interest showing in face and in eyes. Now he lifted a hand, and Old Sobersides ceased speaking, a grim smile coming into his strong face.

"Can't I do the work, sir? We are so different in build, that no one would think of me, in connection with you."

"Would you take the risk, son, knowing that discovery would mean almost certain death?"

"Yes, and gladly! With what information you can give me, I ought to be able to pass inspection. If I fail, be sure 'twill not be through lack of nerve when the pinch comes."

Very quietly the young man spoke, and while there was an abundance of confidence, there was nothing of boasting in his speech.

"You'd not be a true Montgomery if nerve was lacking, son," declared Old Sobersides never tired of praising his old friend, through one of that friend's blood. "But nerve isn't all of it, worse luck! As Major Mordaunt, who, in, disguise or in his own proper person, almost certainly belongs to the Brotherhood, I could have turned the trick with but little actual risk."

"But, since you can't play that part, why not let me try another?"

"Wait. If Gibson is really the head-imp, as I now firmly believe, he'll surely call a meeting, and be at the rendezvous himself, to put the entire gang on the alert. That alone will prevent any person of my size or build passing, unless thoroughly well known to the rest."

"I can disguise my face so my own sister wouldn't own me, but I can't make my body larger or smaller, enough to pass inspection. Still, if a spy could attend the gathering which will almost certainly take place this very night, he might be able to pick up the proof we lack; enough to fully justify us in closing in on our game, at least!"

Old Sobersides gave a rueful sigh as he ceased speaking. It was a tempting prospect, surely! And only for one of those awkward chances which no man can always guard against, everything might have worked so smoothly!

"I would have passed the word through

Pickett and Clark. I would have forced the whole dirty game bare. But now—if I could even begin to do the thing justice, I'd rear up on end and cuss a blue streak!"

"Can't you force a full confession out of this Nipper Noll?"

"No, for I've tested him. This Brotherhood is an oath-bound organization, and the penalty is so severe that even a cur like Pickett will submit to all tortures rather than leak a single word."

"All of which brings us around to the old point, Mr. Sober. You need a spy; let me play that part, sir!"

Old Sobersides gazed keenly into that pale but resolute face. He seemed inwardly debating the point, and presently, he asked:

"Are you sure you're strong enough for such a task, son?"

"Yes. My hurts were not serious. The most painful was where that big fellow cut me, and his knife glanced along a rib, outside. I can get about without showing the faintest sign of having been hurt. And I am not only ready, but eager for the task."

It was a good exhibition of nerve Montgomery was giving. Although fairly on fire to gain the detective's consent to his undertaking the perilous mission, he concealed his excitement, speaking deliberately, in calm, even tones.

"If you should fail, discovery would mean your death, son."

"So be it, but I shall not be discovered. Remember, sir, I am working for more than my own life and honor: I am working for her!"

Even now Montgomery avoided all show of excitement. He felt that he was being thoroughly tested as to the strength of his nerve by this Old Style Detective, and was determined that no fault should be found with him on that score, at least.

Old Sobersides leaned back in his chair, pulling at his full under-lip, that action alone betraying deep reflection.

Montgomery had learned to understand that movement, and as a further proof of his calmness, he waited patiently for the detective to make the next move.

Old Sobersides passed his keen eyes over that erect figure and swarthy face, then dropped hold of his lips, leaning forward a bit as he spoke again:

"Well, I don't know, son. Gibson would be dreadfully disappointed if his spy didn't show up, to report. Reckon I'll send Nipper Noll!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

NIPPER NOLL REPORTS.

THERE was more than one hearty greeting for Nipper Noll that evening as he crossed the deadline and found himself fairly within the unsavory confines of The Patch.

As a matter of course every crook in town was familiar with the fact of his arrest (for their detention as witnesses amounted to just that, when shorn of all disguise), in company with Nosey Clark, his pal.

Their release on bail, to appear when wanted, was less widely known, since it had happened so recently, yet even that word had entered The Patch, and few expressions of surprise met the pickpocket.

He was hardly in the humor for conversation, even with old friends, but they readily accepted the excuse "business," and passed on, each in his or her turn.

For some little time Nipper Noll had been lounging about not far removed from Dolly Varden's place, as though his "business" was in some manner connected with that popular resort, when he was noticed and at once accosted by a brace of individuals who appeared something the worse for drink.

"Hi-you, Nipper! What sort o' luck did you tumble over, anyhow?"

The speaker was Nosey Clark, and his present companion was the far more gentlemanly appearing William Barnes, alias Billy the Banker.

Nipper Noll gave a warning hiss, then curtly replied:

"Straight goods, or else a mighty smooth counterfeit."

"Straight, eh? Well, somebody else don't look at it in that light. Run up against the word yet, Noll?"

"What word's that?"

"The old word. Meeting to-night, of course."

"No. I've been so busy I haven't had time to—same place and time, of course?"

"Cert. Reckoned you knew it, glimpsing you here," replied Billy the Banker. "Boss sent out a special call. Hope there's work on hand, for I'm growing blue-moldy for lack of exercise."

"That's all right, if you only think so," declared Nosey Clark, with a significant shrug of his narrow shoulders. "But if all's true what they're saying about O'd Sobersides, I'd a mighty sight rather lay low and stuff my ears against thunder-claps!"

"Who says what about old Solomon?" asked Nipper Noll, with a show of increased interest in the chatter of his companions.

Clark quickly told of the discovery made at the ruins, that morning, then added:

"And if it wasn't that devil you shadowed today, Noll, who in blazes could he have been?"

"What did you find out about him, Pickett?" asked Barnes.

But Nipper Noll shook his head, resolutely. His report was for the ears of the superior who gave him the assignment, and must not be lessened in value by straining through more vulgar ears on its way.

Baffled on this point, but showing no trace of annoyance or disappointment, the two crooks locked arms with Nipper Noll, and the trio picked their way to Varden's saloon.

Dolly himself was on duty, fairly gorgeous in his attire, and having greeted the trio as they presented themselves at the bar for a friendly drink, he gave them a parting nod, then turned his attention toward a new-comer, whose powerful form and heavily bearded face appeared to inspire the saloon-keeper with strong respect.

The crooks, too, drew aside at that approach, and watched every movement made by the one whom they recognized as chief.

They were not kept long in waiting. The chief seemed thoroughly acquainted with faces and figures, since he only lingered at the bar until two outsiders left the saloon, then gave a covert sign which caused the crooks to follow after him as he left the room by a rear door.

This brought them into another and smaller room, where Varden stowed away his empty kegs and boxes until otherwise disposed of. There was no light in here, but a faint glow came through the curtained transom over the connecting door, and that proved sufficient.

Billy the Banker gallantly sprang forward, to stoop and raise a trap door, holding it open while the chief made his way down the short flight of steps.

Being promptly followed by the crooks, the chief groped his way across the dark cellar, then opened a door of some description, from the other side of which showed a dimly burning candle.

Nipper Noll, coming last, closed the door behind them, then followed close upon the heels of Nosey Clark, he in turn pressing upon Billy the Banker, who was led by the chief of all.

It was a damp, dark, foul-smelling passage, hardly wide enough for two men to walk abreast, but all hands seemed accustomed to it, and only a brief pause was made at the further end of the tunnel.

Here was another door, and evidently one which could not be passed or opened simply by turning key or touching spring. The chief rapped, then muttered some word or token as a little round hole showed itself in the barrier.

The ordeal was a brief one, and the door swung open, admitting the quartette to the same dingy, ill-scented rendezvous where the desperate plot against Old Sobersides had been formed, the past week.

Several members of the Brotherhood were already on hand, and one of them had attended the door, only permitting the chief to enter after giving the correct password.

Of course, as he was recognized, no further precautions were taken against those who bore him company, although the crooks were fully prepared to "work their way in," according to rule, if called upon.

The chief, after casting a keen glance around the room, as though taking note of each face in turn, passed direct to the station set apart for the presiding officer, standing at the small table, leaning upon his hands for a few moments while scanning his men in silence.

If he was disappointed at the small gathering on this particular occasion, nothing in his face betrayed that fact, possibly because he, in his burning anxiety, had reached the rendezvous rather before the hour named in his special call.

This brief inspection at an end, the chief called for the word and sign, which was promptly given.

Though few in number, the Brothers were strong in spirit, and made up in vehemence what they lacked in volume.

It was a very pretty display of "the working emblems of the Order," and not until their presiding officer lifted his hand in warning, did the thugs lower their pistols and knives, or cease their watchwords.

Nipper Noll and Nosey Clark were among the more enthusiastic ones, as seemed but natural, since this was celebrating their restoration to liberty.

A brief silence fell over all as the chief restored quiet. Every other eye was turned upon his face or figure, for one and all were anxious to learn just why the extraordinary session had been called.

"Brethren, true and faithful!" presently spoke the chief, his deep tones fairly filling that dingy room, yet without forming an echo which might prove dangerous through attracting attention from outsiders.

He was checked at that point by an alarm at the door, which resulted in admitting a fresh batch of members, after satisfying the guard that they were fully qualified to attend.

"Brethren, true and faithful," repeated their superior officer, as soon as that brief bustle came

to an end. "I have called you together for the good of the Order. Danger is menacing us, not alone as individuals, but as a united family. The very grave appears to have given up its dead, to work evil to us and to our plans for the material advancement of the Order."

"I have much to report, as a member, but before I begin, I would like you all to hear what one of your number has to say. Brother Oliver Pickett?"

Nipper Noll took a step forward, saluting with the sign of the Order, answering in his well-known, squeaky voice:

"By Bullet and Steel, father!"

"One of the faithful informed me you had been dispatched on an important mission, today. Have you performed your duty, brother?"

"The very best I knew how, father."

"That is all any one could ask, judging from your past noble record, brother," bowed the chief flatteringly. "You may deliver your report, and we will be your judges."

Nipper Noll hesitated for a brief space, but only to pick the right words, it seemed, since he spoke fluently enough, once he got started.

"Well, brothers, I was given the tip to shadow a man, and of course I got on his track the quickest I knew how. I followed him as faithfully as his own shadow could 'a' done, through so many crooks and turns that it 'peared like he was expectin' somethin' of the sort, and was doin' his level best to shake whoever it might be."

"You surely didn't permit him to smoke you, Pickett?" sharply demanded the chief, forgetting forms in his anxiety. "You must have known how important it was to run him down, without stirring up his suspicions on that score?"

"If I didn't jest *know* I was makin' a powerful guess that way, sir," replied Nipper Noll, with a faint smile coming into his swarthy face.

"Good! this shall not be forgotten you, brother," declared the presiding officer, with an echo of relief in his tones.

"Well, sir, I stuck to my knitting, and the cove, he stuck to the pavel. I began to think he was trying to wear out his boots at a single heat, but I was told to find out where he went, and of course I had to do just that!"

"I caught him lookin' back a heap o' times, but he never ketched on, fur s I could make out. I'm pretty sure he never spotted me, since he gave up his doubling and twisting in the end, and steered straight for his hashery."

"You traced him to the end, then? Where was that?"

"The Planter's House, boss."

"Are you sure he didn't go there, simply to throw you off the scent, by mixing it up in a crowd?"

"I can't think that way, sir."

"Your reasons, Pickett?"

"Well, sir, one of 'em you can see for yourself, if you take the trouble to look over the hotel register."

"You found his name there?"

"I just did," with a touch of triumph in his squeaky tones. "I watched my chance, and took a look over the shoulder of a party who was searching the register. I found the name of Major Adelbert Mordaunt, writ' mighty bold, and over against it was the number 18."

"That of his chamber, no doubt. But—was it really the major you shadowed, Pickett?"

"So I thought, first, but now—he's Old Sobersides, or the devil!"

CHAPTER XXX.

BY BULLET AND STEEL.

THIS abrupt declaration made by Nipper Noll created a sensation, as its author undoubtedly designed.

An ugly muttering ran from lip to lip, and the thugs there assembled showed strong excitement in face and actions.

Nor was this lessened in degree by the fierce outburst which came from the presiding officer, an instant later:

"Both in one!" he rumbled in his deepest tones, striking the stand with his tightly clinched fist. "Old Sobersides is the devil himself! And unless we lay him by the heels in mighty short order, he'll play the devil and all with the Brothers of Bullet and Steel!"

Another ugly wave of sound caused the chief to pause, but his lifted right hand quickly brought back order, when he added:

"It seems impossible, I'll admit, yet I'm forced to conclude that, despite all we did, Solomon Sober really cheated us, that night. And I'd give a pretty penny to learn just how he contrived it, too!"

"You all know what took place. You all know how we left those two bounds, bleeding, apparently dying, if not already dead. Then, too, you've all heard what Zenas Harvey reported: and his report was amply backed up by outside proof, remember: that Old Sobersides carried Ross Montgomery into the blazing house, where not even the police or the firemen dared follow, and out of which neither man came, up to the moment when the roof fell in, and the side-walls crumbled in a glowing heap!"

As the chief came to a pause, Billy the Banker

started forward, with eager hand making the regular sign which asked permission to speak.

"Brother Barnes?" recognized the presiding officer.

"I happened to be passing by the place, early this morning, father, and I saw something which may explain it all. The ruins were being cleared away, for the purpose of rebuilding. The workmen had come upon an odd-looking opening, and they had explored it far enough to show that a tunnel ran from the cellar of the house, clear back to the barn at the alley-end of the lot."

The chief gave a fierce gesture at this information, which doubtless accounted for the startling resurrection of the supposed dead.

"I more than suspected something of the sort, when I heard how that cunning old devil acted, that night. But, as time passed on and I failed to discover aught to confirm those suspicions, I began to hope our most dangerous enemy had perished forever."

"Then 'twas Sober I shadowed, boss?" asked Nipper Noll, with a little quaver in his peculiarly pitched voice.

"It must have been, yes," viciously assented the chief. "And yet, I begin to think we'd ought to rejoice, rather than show regret over this resurrection!"

The change was so abrupt, so complete, that the gang might well be excused for so openly showing surprise. Show it they did, in such manner as to extract a short laugh from those heavily-bearded lips.

"Is it so difficult to understand, my lads?" he asked, coolly. "Well, I'll explain, when possibly you may take the same view of it as I am taking."

"You surely know what manner of man this Solomon Sober has proved himself, not only since he began ferreting out our secrets, but long back of that day; a natural-born bloodhound, who never gave over a trail until he ran it to the end!"

"Of course 'twould be better to know him dead, but so long as we lacked proof positive on that point—so long as none of us had seen the rascal in his coffin, and the coffin regularly planted—just so long we would have felt in peril."

"Now, as Major Mordaunt he has been tracked to his nest. As Major Mordaunt he will feel himself safe against any or all of us. He will rely upon the report of his perishing in the flames to cover his movements in his fresh disguise, long enough for us to finish the job."

"Finish it we must, and that before another sun comes up! The loss of even a single hour may make all the difference between complete success and utter ruin!"

"Old Sobersides is surely playing in with the police, and I'll tell you why I am so confident on this point. I can do that much, since I barely escaped falling into a cunning snare they placed for me this very forenoon!"

"Chief Zouche sent me word, this morning, to call at his office, without fail, as he had an important communication to make. Of course I responded. I couldn't well decline, nor could I see any reason why I ought not to make that call."

"I went to the Central, where I saw Nipper Noll and Nosey Clark. They seemed greatly surprised at meeting me thus, and Nipper let drop a bare hint that mischief was brewing, but without warning me of its precise nature."

"How dast I, boss, with all them blasted cops watchin' of us?" squeaked the pickpocket, in an injured tone of voice.

"Of course you couldn't, brother, and I'm not finding fault. You gave the warning sign, and that told me danger was in the air. Still, I was wholly unprepared to meet the danger in the precise shape it took: that cunning devil, made up to represent the major who was with Austin Bainbridge the night he met his death!"

"I would have been more than mortal, if I hadn't shown signs of being startled when I saw that sight, but I turned it off so adroitly that, no matter what their suspicions might be, neither of those devils could say I convicted myself."

"I made a big fuss over the fellow being allowed to go free, when he surely must have been the one to kill Bainbridge, rather than Ross Montgomery. And—well, enough for now, that I covered up my little stumble as well as any man could have done, if I do say so myself."

The chief paused, partly to catch breath, partly to fix in his mind the words he ought to use next.

His recital had deeply interested the members of the gang, which, added to from time to time, was now nearly complete. And judging from their whispered comments and their uneasy glances passing back and forth, they were more alarmed than interested, even.

"A few words further, brethren," spoke up their leader, rapping with knuckles on stand to attract full attention. "Taking everything into full and careful consideration, isn't it almost certain that Old Sobersides is alive, and that he is working against us with the hearty cooperation of Chief Zouche?"

"It does look that way!" answered one of the band, for all hands.

"It certainly does, brother, but 'twill do no harm to group the main facts together, so all can see I am not calling action without good and solid grounds."

"Old Sobersides slipped through that fire with his life, if not the life of Ross Montgomery as well. Even if the finding of that tunnel wasn't enough, the lack of bones or bodies amply prove as much."

"Who else could counterfeit Major Mordaunt so perfectly as to deceive both Nipper Noll and Nosey Clark? And acting in concert with Chief Zouche proves that he is backed by the cops for all they're worth!"

"You all know how long Sober has been trying to discover our secrets as an organization; now he's once fairly on the scent, he's more to be feared than all the police force! And they are backing him up, you want to bear in mind, as well."

"Our chances as a money-making concern were never more brilliant than they are right now, but we can't afford to have such a cunning demon as Sober prowling around us. And so—brothers! I speak to you by the watchword of our noble Order!"

Swiftly drawing a pistol and a dirk, the chief flung up his arms to their fullest extent, his spectacled eyes seeming to flash fire in the dull light as he glanced over the gathering.

As one man, the entire gang of thugs imitated his actions, and as his deep voice led them, they gave the savage watchword of the Order:

"By Bullet and Steel! We swear!"

"By Bullet and Steel, brothers!" added their chief, as the wild flourish of weapons came to an end and silence followed. "By that word I am speaking to you now, one and all."

"While Solomon Sober lives, we are not safe. Until he is surely dead, our entire organization is in danger of being blotted out. And as one life has no right to be respected as against hundreds, I bid you all go seek to remove that dangerous obstacle."

He paused, but only for a single breath. Then he added:

"You know in what guise to expect him. Go look for Major Mordaunt, and when you find him, watch for the right instant when you can send Bullet or Steel to his brain or his heart! Never stop to ask whether he is really Mordaunt, or really Sober, but strike hard, and strike sure!"

"By power vested in me as head of this branch, at liberty to act in accordance with my best judgment in an emergency, I hereby promise the man or men who silence this deadly enemy of our noble Order, the sum of one thousand dollars, in hard cash!"

It was a truly magnificent offer, and many of those who had cast dubious looks at their nearest pals, now broke into glad cries. For a sum of that dimensions, they would have driven bullet or steel through heart or brain of their nearest relative.

"In addition, brothers, he or they will be defended by all the power of our Order, only—put the hound off the scent forever!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

NIPPER NOLL SNUBBED.

THE speech of their presiding officer was well received by the lawless assembly, for it was just such as they could best appreciate.

The reward offered was large enough to pay for a half-score lives, so far as mere killing went, and hardly one of those present but had already experienced the great benefit thief or thug had in being supported by such a powerful organization.

In case of arrest while in the line of duty as prescribed by that Order, or because of actions committed as a member, one and all were fully assured of being defended through every crook and turn of the courts, where money and trouble was counted as naught, life and liberty as above all other considerations.

The chief paused long enough to permit his words to take full effect, and then he called for quiet by rapping sharply upon the stand back of which he was standing.

His influence was strong, since silence almost instantly fell over that busily-buzzing assembly, all eyes turning his way, every member eager to learn what further their master might have to offer.

"This resurrection of Solomon Sober was the principal reason for my sending forth a call for a special meeting, brothers," he began, his deep-pitched voice making every syllable distinctly audible to all ears, though he spoke without seeming effort.

"While this human bloodhound lives and prowls around the streets of St. Louis, not one of us is safe from arrest, either as an individual or as a unit, in this, our noble Order."

"For many months past Old Sobersides has been devoting his time and talents to investigating the Brothers of Bullet and Steel. He has already made more than one damaging discovery, and if he is let have full play a few days longer he will surely deal us a blow so heavy that we may never be able to fully recover from it."

"These are my reasons for offering a liberal reward for his being thrown off the scent forever. This is why I in advance pledge all the support and backing of the Order to whoever may claim the double honor of winning that prize, and removing the most dangerous enemy our organization has ever recognized."

"And now, having done my sworn duty as head and front of the branch which covers this city, brothers, I come to the next most important move. I want a few good, reliable men to volunteer for special service."

This request came rather unexpectedly, and for a little while its full meaning was hardly taken in. But among the first to start forward was Nipper Noll!

Billy the Banker caught him by an arm as he did so, hastily muttering in an ear the while:

"Don't be a fool, Noll! He don't want you, and I do!"

Nevertheless, up flew Pickett's right arm, as though nothing could please him better than to be taken as one of the volunteers called for by their chief.

There was no lack of volunteers when once the call was fully comprehended, and the leader gave a nod of approval as he glanced over that sturdy array before making his selection.

"It does my heart good to see such a prompt response, brothers, and while it is hardly necessary to say so much, I'll add now that those chosen by me will be working for the good of the Order. There may be a strong spice of danger in the job, but that will be taken fully into account when payment is made for the services rendered."

"I wish I might take all who have offered. It would be less difficult than making a selection from amongst so many. I require only four men, and they shall be—"

He hesitated, as though in doubt which ones to settle upon. And now Nipper Noll shook off the detaining grasp of Billy the Banker, and forged nearer the front, his hand waving as though he wished to fix that keen gaze fairly upon himself.

But all that produced no effect. The selection was made, and Pickett was left out in the cold.

"It's lucky he didn't, my boy," Barnes hastened to say, in guarded tones. "Don't you know that—"

"I know that I'd give a heap to go!" exclaimed Nipper Noll, in tones loud enough to catch the ears of their superior.

"Step to the front, Oliver Pickett!" coldly spoke the chief. "You seem discontented with my choice, it appears?"

"Only because I wasn't one of the men hit on, sir," promptly answered the crook, showing an unusual degree of boldness, as it seemed to those who knew him best. "Can't I go 'long, then, sir?"

"Go along where?"

Nipper Noll flinched a bit from this cold query, but as quickly rallied, to say:

"With you, boss. Mebbe you've picked out lads as 'll do more hard work, but never a one among 'em 'll do it with a heartier good-will than me, just so you give me a show, sir!"

"You're as good as the best, in your specialty, Nipper, but this bit of work is over your head, I'm thinking. As a shadow, you're way up on the rolls, but as a workman, where both skill and courage is needed, I fear you'd hardly prove a dazzling success."

Nipper Noll flinched perceptibly, but there was an angry glitter coming into his black eyes as a low, jeering sound ran around the room, and rallying quickly, he protested:

"Because a cove hain't always huntin' up a scrap, or a job that'll surely get his name into the papers, boss, is no reason he can't show true grit when the right time comes for sech a show-in'! And that's my excuse for askin' a show this trip."

"Please explain a bit fuller, Pickett."

"Well, boss, it looks to me as though you 'lowed to make a raid on the enemy, so to speak. If it's against either Old Sobersides or Ross Montgomery, I'd dearly like a finger in the pie! And I reckon I'd go in just as deep as the next man, sir!"

"Why so? Explain yourself, Pickett."

"Because, I know they've both got it in for me—big as a hog, and keen as a starved wolf, sir! They know I lied to the cops, and afore the coroner. They know I'm one o' the nails in the coffin fixin' up for the young sport, and so—can't I chip in, boss?"

Nipper Noll was decidedly in earnest, and even those who had all along deemed him a coward, could no longer doubt his ardor. But the chief had made his selection, and had no immediate use for the shadow, as he made no bones about informing that anxious personage.

"You mean well, no doubt, Pickett, but I've made my election, and have no opening left for you. Still, since you seem particularly hot against both Sober and Montgomery—"

"They've surely got it in for me, boss! If they're let run free, I'll have to hunt a mighty dark hole, and draw it in after me, too!"

"Well, you trailed Sober to his hotel. If Montgomery is still in the land of the living, there is where you're most apt to strike his

scent. You can try your hand at bullet or steel, if the craze will carry you so far."

Nipper Noll, though with a very bad grace, accepted his defeat, falling back with sulky looks, rudely giving his pals the cold shoulder.

Having made his selection of aides, the chief cut little more time to waste, simply telling the other members that they were at liberty to earn the big reward as quickly as they might.

"Of course, brothers, you are in duty bound to run as little risk of discovery or capture as possible. While the Order will defend you with all its powers of influence and money, in case you should come to grief while trying to advance its material interests, the League expects each member to act just as though the entire responsibility rested upon his own shoulders."

Having said his say, and chosen the men whom he felt best suited for the particular bit of work which he had in view, the chief cut very little time to waste, closing the assembly with the briefest of forms.

Giving the chosen four a sign to follow him, he left the rendezvous by one of the narrow doors, through using which he could avoid the necessity of retracing his steps through the long passage to Varden's saloon.

Nipper Noll impulsively started after them, but both Billy the Banker and Nosey Clark checked him with muttered protests.

"You're gone crazy, man! The boss let you off mighty light, but if you try to crowd in again where you're not wanted—"

"He'll set down on ye, Nipper, an' you'll never get over bein' flattened out!" supplemented Nosey, with the owlish wisdom of a man rather more than half intoxicated.

Oliver Pickett himself appeared to recognize the folly of further persistence, and yielding to his mates with sulky reluctance, he followed their lead out of the foul-smelling rendezvous, which was being deserted by the remainder of the company.

On reaching the cellar stairs leading to the room back of the saloon proper, all talk came to an end, and the crooks observed such caution as had long since become second nature to them.

One passed in advance of the rest, to a tiny peep-hole through which the saloon could be inspected, and reporting that no strangers were in sight, the door was opened and the crowd filed into the bar, filling the place rather inconveniently full.

Nipper Noll would have been among the foremost to pass through the opened door, but once more Billy the Banker caught an arm, muttering in guarded tones:

"Easy, lad! We've got something heap sight better than a rush to the free trough with the rest of the swine!"

"Bet yer sweet life, honey!" grunted Nosey Clark, as his quota.

Instead of following the rest, Barnes passed out of the building by a rear door, followed closely by Clark and Pickett. Only pausing when under the stars for a glance back to assure himself that he was not deserted by the pals he had selected, the bank-sneak passed along to a narrow opening between Varden's and the next building.

This was barely wide enough for the men to squeeze their way through, but they succeeded in gaining the street without much difficulty, and then, pausing where the lights from Dolly's place fell upon their faces and figures, Billy the Banker spoke, softly:

"Shall we take a ball, mates, or have we already had enough?"

"Nough for me," said Clark, shaking himself. "Just ripe for good work, but another pill'd make me too rotten!"

"What sort of work is it, mates?" asked Nipper Noll, slipping a hand through each crook's arm, moving slowly away from the saloon. "If it's anything to down our worst enemies, count me in, clear up to the neck!"

Before an answer could be given, a rough-clad figure came lurching along, to clap Pickett between the shoulders, saying in a roughened tone:

"Hellow, kid! Introduce me to—hic—your pals, my covey!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE GENTLEMAN FROM JOLIET.

BOTH Barnes and Clark started away with instinctive uneasiness, but Nipper Noll quickly set their growing fears at rest.

It only took a single glance for him to recognize that uncouth shape, even had the voice and familiar speech left room for doubt as to the intruder's identity.

"My old man, boys," he said, in an off-hand manner, but hardly in a tone of pride at that relationship.

"Just down from Joliet, gents," briskly supplemented the new-comer, like one who scorned to sail under false colors, even among friends.

"Glad to meet ye, gents. What'll ye take?"

An off-hand gesture pointed his meaning, and like an old toper, the old fellow took a step back toward Dolly Varden's place.

Billy the Banker had flinched, almost like one on the point of taking to his heels in speedy

flight, at first sound of that husky voice, but now he rallied, peering keenly into that face, to finally say:

"It's—you're really Pickett, then?"

"Lacking paint and polish, but just as sharp on the top as I ever was, sir," chuckled the old fellow, giving a slight lurch as he squared around, one hand catching Nipper Noll by a shoulder as support. "Got tired of rusticating at Joliet, and when the warden told me to skin out, I skunk without waiting for a kick! And here I be, hard-up as to rocks, but with as sweet a lip for whisky, as strong a hand for a jimmy, eyes wide open for a raise, and ready to go as far as the next best man to crack a safe, pick a lock, or sandbag a lusher!"

Evidently the senior Pickett felt himself in congenial company, for he certainly was frank enough in his speech. There was an odor of bad liquor hovering around him as a halo, but he certainly was not too nearly drunk to be able to take care of himself, let the surroundings be rough as they might.

Nipper Noll, with great dexterity, if scanty reverence for the author of his being, slipped from under that heavy hand, letting it fall on Billy the Banker instead, himself passing around to slip in between his two pals, muttering, in apologetic tones:

"Old man's drunk again! Don't let him see we're trying to shake him, or he'll cut up too rusty for any sort o' use."

"None o' your back-cappin' the ancient, Noll, you slippery little devil!" warningly croaked the new-comer, linking arms with Barnes as he spoke. "Maybe I'm not quite so spruce as the rest of you, but if there's any such thing as a stake lying round loose in St. Louis, I'll be able to rig out with the toniest of ye all, by sun-up!"

Billy the Banker seemed ill at ease, although he knew well enough that Nipper Noll had a father who was, or recently had been, "doing time" in the Illinois Penitentiary on a charge of burglary.

His main object in checking Pickett when that rash individual started forward in answer to the call for volunteers, was a wish to secure his aid together with that already pledged by Nosey Clark, in "cracking a crib" which he had long been watching with an eye to the future.

But what would be just a neat haul for three crooks would hardly bear division into four parts, and he heartily wished the senior Pickett had never left Joliet.

Clark, on the contrary, seemed glad to have such an old and practiced hand as an ally, and at once blurted out the job they had in view, though Barnes tried to check him in time.

"Was that what you held me back for, Billy?" asked Nipper Noll, on the instant. "Will it pay? Is there boodle enough for four, think?"

"Nosey's a fool, and I was only coddling him," growlingly retorted the bank-sneak. "I don't know of any such job, really."

"Which means that the old man's in the way?" coolly asked the gentleman from Joliet.

"Why don't you say it, cully?"

"I'm out, unless you're willing to count the old man in," declared Nipper Noll.

But the "old man" seemed amply able to speak and act for himself!

His left hand tightened upon Billy the Banker's arm and his right hand pushed the muzzle of a revolver smartly against the crook's ribs, letting him hear the double click as the hammer was raised to full cock, then sternly saying:

"Button your lips, Billy! I'll blow a tunnel clean through you at your first chirp above a whisper!"

At the same instant Nipper Noll fastened upon Nosey Clark after much the same fashion, with the same stern warning.

"What—I don't—" gasped Barnes, shivering and flinching from that significant pressure.

"Quiet! I don't wish to harm you, but if a row is kicked up before we can leave The Patch safely behind us, I'll lay you out, too dead for skinning!"

There came a change in voice, and Billy the Banker gave a low, shuddering gasp as he recognized the speaker at last.

"Yes, I'm Old Sobersides, and I'll let you know just why I'm giving you the collar, when the proper time comes 'round. Nipper Noll?"

"Yes, boss?"

"You can manage Nosey, I reckon?"

"If he don't try to break away, boss."

"If he's fool enough to try that, shoot him. I'll be responsible."

"If you say so—you hear, mate? 'Course I'll hate mightily to do sech a thing, but—well, he's got me foul, just as tight as I've got you, Nosey!"

Neither of the crooks offered any resistance as they were hurried along toward the "Deadline." Neither of them were noted for their nerve, though cunning enough when only ordinary obstacles were to be surmounted.

Had a capital charge hung over their heads, it is doubtful if either rascal would have found courage enough to run away from much less offer resistance to, the Old-Style Detective.

Old Sobersides fully realized the risks he was running, though, in making an arrest within the limits of The Patch, and he hurried his

prize along at a rapid rate, trusting Nipper Noll to hold fast grip on Nosey Clark.

Fortunately nothing occurred to bring about blows or shooting, and without experiencing any trouble, the detective reached a spot where a close hack was in waiting for his coming.

The driver was the same man who had helped confuse Nipper Noll not so very many hours earlier in the day, and he required no elaborate instructions on this occasion, either.

"Inside with your man, Noll," coldly spoke the Old-Style Detective, as the driver opened the nearest door to his carriage. "If he tries to bolt straight through, shoot him, as you would any other skunk!"

After such a blunt warning, it was hardly likely either of the captured crooks would show stubbornness, and when Sober pushed Billy the Banker through the open door, that worthy sunk meekly upon a seat, giving his burly captor plenty of room as Old Sobersides followed after.

"You know where to go, driver; make it lively!" said the detective, as he took his seat.

As soon as the door was closed and secured, and the hack started on its way, Old Sobersides produced a couple of pairs of handcuffs, giving one to Nipper Noll, using the other for his particular prize.

"Never you mind what it's all for, Billy," he said, gruffly, cutting short the almost timid question which the crook started to ask. "I'm running this little side-show, and the fewer questions asked, the less lying you'll hear."

Nipper Noll was a bit more considerate, and as he rather clumsily adjusted the irons upon Clark's wrists, he muttered in general tones:

"I just had to, cully! I couldn't get out of it, for he swore—"

"Button that lip of yours, Nipper Noll!" sternly interposed Old Sobersides. "I'll do what explaining is necessary, thank you!"

That could hardly be called an exhilarating drive, but fortunately the ironed crooks were not held in very long suspense, so far as their immediate destination was concerned.

Brisk driving soon carried them to the private house to which Nipper Noll had been conducted by the detective that same forenoon, and as the hack drew up close to the curb, Old Sobersides gave the prisoners a quiet warning:

"So long as you behave yourselves, and try to play white, my lads, you'll come to no serious harm. But if you try to break away, I'll stop you with cold lead, rather than make a foot-race of it."

Opening the door, he emerged first, then linked an arm with Barnes, and another with Clark. A nod sent Nipper Noll in advance to the door of the building, to which they were promptly admitted by Hannah Sober.

She betrayed no surprise at such an arrival, and no words were spoken on either side.

Sending Nipper Noll ahead with Clark, Sober led Barnes up to the second story, then stowed both crooks away in temporary safety, after much the same fashion he had used in securing Pickett, that forenoon.

Leaving them thus for the time being, warning them to make no row, under penalty of suffering far worse treatment, the detective signed Pickett to follow after, making his way to the chamber in which he had consulted with Ross Montgomery.

Closing the door behind them, he abruptly spoke:

"Couldn't you bait bigger fishes? Wasn't Gibson there, son?"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A VILLAINOUS PLOT.

CLOSELY followed by the four men whom he had selected from all the brothers to volunteer on special service, the chief of that lawless gang left the rendezvous by one of the private exits, and only pausing to make sure there was no danger of being seen emerging, he struck out at a brisk pace, as though the business he had in contemplation lay beyond the limits of The Patch.

No questions were asked by his followers. They seemed fully content to trust their leader, both as to the nature of the service required at their hands, and the reward they were to receive in return.

On his part, his only words warned them to keep a keen watch on all sides, and notify him promptly in case anything like spying on their movements was observed.

This proved to be a needless precaution, however, and their immediate destination was reached without aught occurring to awaken suspicion on their part.

The chief produced a key to the door before which he made his first halt, and swinging the barrier wide, he motioned his chosen tools to enter before him. All was darkness inside, but the thugs crossed the threshold without hesitation, and shortly after the door closed behind them, the flicker of a match grew into the steadier glow of a pair of candles.

By this light they glanced around them, taking note of their surroundings, which bore the appearance of an office. Judging from the subjects treated upon by the books, of which there was quite an extensive library, he who owned

or occupied those premises belonged to the legal profession.

There was little actual curiosity in those glances, since each one of the chosen four had long since known who this, their leader, really was when out of disguise, and when that chief gave sign that he wished their attention, it was given him at once.

"You are each one of you ready to follow instructions, of course?" he began. "You will do just as I say, and stick to the line I'm marking out, lads?"

"Kin we do it, though, boss?"

"Of course you can, Metcalfe, or I'd never think of putting you to work. There is no actual danger in the job, but it calls for prompt and ready acting."

"We'll all do that much, 'long's you let us see just what it is you want of us, boss. Course we might blunder some if we had to go it blind, like."

"That's all right, lads. I'll jump over any little obstacles you think best to point out, after you've seen just what your job consists of. That is to carry off a young woman."

Big Metcalfe gave a little start, and his mates glanced at each other as though they were more surprised than delighted with the prospect opening before them.

Their chief was taking note, and quickly answered some of their unspoken objections.

"It's no private affair, lads, but a speculation which must fetch big money to the family. The place is out of the way, where a girl might split her lungs wide open without alarming any other person than herself. And I've smoothed the way so that you will have precious little more to do than just pick her up, scoot, drop her again: the job over with, long before daylight comes."

"If you say it's to be done, sir, of course we'll try our level," said Zenas Harvey, whose name has been mentioned more than once in the pages gone by.

"That is all I ask, and enough to satisfy anybody," frankly declared their master. "If the trick was ten times as difficult, I'd never doubt your ability to turn it successfully."

"Is it fur we've got to travel, boss?" a bit gruffly cut in Metcalfe, who seemed averse to that variety of sweets popularly termed "taffy."

"Out a ways on the Carondelet Road. I reckon you know where the Palmer Place is?"

Light began to break upon those minds, and after a swift interchange of looks the four crooks showed a greater interest in the affair.

"Of course you do," added the boss, in response to those nods. "And you know, too, that I'm merely pressing a bit harder the game which was long since decided upon by the Order, in council."

"You four fellows are plenty enough to handle the matter and to take care of all who are at all likely to offer trouble, either at the house or along the way back."

"You'll freeze fast to the girl, muffle and gag her, if you think it necessary, then hurry her to the river. You'll cross over to East St. Louis and place your prize under care of Mammy Peters. You know her, Harvey?"

"Yes, sir, but—it's a risky business, dead sure! And if we were caught at it, I reckon we'd mighty soon find out how it feels to pull hemp without hands, too!"

The faces of his companion crooks showed how plainly they shared these fears, but the chief gave a mocking laugh before retorting:

"That's all in your eye, Zene Harvey! So far as danger is concerned, you run just as great a risk every time you climb a pair of stairs: your foot might slip, you might fall, and if you should tumble, you might possibly break your blessed neck! One is just as sensible as the other, and you're all old enough to know as much, too."

"You know where the house is: on a road that is lonely enough at night to suit any owl. There is only one man-servant kept, and he has been 'fixed,' so that he wouldn't hear a sound though a hundred women were howling and screeching their loudest, not ten feet from the head of his bunk."

"Besides him, there's only one woman: the housekeeper. You can stop her jaw easily enough. I'd say croak her, only I'd rather leave as few signs of violence behind as must be. You can look after her first, or Metcalfe surely ought to be able to handle the fat old cat!"

"Those two disposed of, there's only the girl to manage. She'll not be able to bother you much, if you only begin right. Just bundle her up snugly, tote her through the back way, across the open ground, to the hack which I'll have waiting for you there."

"The driver will be a trusty rascal, but you needn't let on that you know it. Just dump him into the ditch, one of you take the ribbons, and make for the river as fast as you can afford to drive."

"Leave the hack at the levee. The driver and owner will be there to take charge of it again. You'll find a boat at the dump, upper end. Get in, pull across, find Mammy Peters, give her the girl, and there you are!"

Described by their master, in quick, off hand manner, the affair did appear marvelously easy, but the four rascals were too wise in the ways of the wicked for letting their eyes be too readily

dazzled. They knew performance would be vastly different, and made no bones about saying as much.

"Of course there will be work, and more or less risk to be run," impatiently retorted the chief. "If there wasn't, would I trouble to pick and pay so many fellows? I selected you four out of nearly ten times your number, and why?"

"Because I thought you would follow orders without kicking all over a quarter-section! Because I believed you true and worthy members of our glorious brotherhood, ready to do as your oath said: cast aside all thoughts of self, for the general good! Now—shall I drop the matter right here, to report you as unworthy, brothers?"

This was something more than the crooks had calculated upon. They thought it no harm to enhance the difficulties before them, thus making their claims a bit more valuable when settling-day arrived. But since their leader took that tone, they at once gave way, pledging themselves to follow his instructions to the very letter, regardless of the obstacles which they might find in their pathway.

"Now you're talking white! As for the after-clap which you appear to dread so much, leave all that to me. When the alarm is given, it will end in proving the abduction nothing more serious than an elopement with a secretly favored lover; see?"

"You mean?"

"That Ross Montgomery will bear the brunt, of course!"

"Can that be fixed, though, sir?" doubtfully asked Harvey.

"Yes. Never you bother about the how, boys. That is my part of the little speculation. All you need look out for is the plain work, and leave the embroidery to me."

"When shall we start, boss?" asked Metcalfe.

"As soon as you like. Of course, you will go in disguise, to hinder old Mother Heaton from describing you too closely. And you will be in plenty time if you hit the place in, say, two hours from now."

"Won't she be in bed, boss?"

"Hardly. I'll keep her awake, never you fear, Metcalfe. And, that reminds me: of course, you'll act just as though we'd never met before. Treat me as an enemy, but give me no rougher handling than I set the cue for, please!"

Adding a few lower-pitched instructions, the chief blew out the lights, and all five rascals left the premises without further delay.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A PLAUSIBLE JUDAS.

ALTHOUGH the hour was growing quite late, Adella Palmer showed no inclination for sleep.

Her unusually pale face bore deeper lines of trouble, and dark semicircles marked her eyes. Tears had reddened and swollen her lids, and while she was little less lovely than she had been before this bitter flood of trouble and grief came over her life, the maiden had aged years in appearance.

A ring at the door brought her to her feet, and when Mrs. Heaton admitted the caller, Adella was at the parlor door to greet his coming.

A wave of rich color leaped into her face as she met the eyes of James Gibson, her relative, for his face was that of one who brought important tidings of some description: almost certainly good news, else his eyes would not meet hers so frankly, so brightly!

"You've heard the news, then, 'Della?" he asked, quickly moving toward her with outstretched hands.

"What news? I've heard nothing, since—Tell me!"

Her hands were clasped within his, and Gibson bore her back into the parlor: not actually, of course, but Adella seemed swept before him as though she was a bit of driftwood, he a curling wave.

A deft touch with his foot closed the door, thus shutting out Mrs. Heaton, whom burning curiosity might otherwise have brought after her loved mistress, so completely did the worthy housekeeper sympathize with Adella's sore troubles.

Adella sunk tremblingly upon the sofa, unable to ask the questions she longed to have answered, so strong were her emotions. Hope blended with fear, and the two combined dimmed her eyes so that she could not even attempt to read the face before her.

James Gibson likewise seemed unusually excited, but he was cool enough to place a chair for himself so that he was seated in front of his young relative, his own back toward the door which opened upon the hall.

"Then you haven't heard the latest news, 'Della?" he asked, at length. "You haven't seen the evening papers?"

"No. Tell me—spare me, cousin, for I'm very weak!"

"Not too weak to hear good news, 'Della?"

"Is it—can there be good news for me? Is it possible that—tell me, please, for I'm choking!"

Gibson caught her fluttering hands, pressing them warmly between his own, murmuring soothing words, much as he might have sought to quiet a fretful child, yet hesitating to give

her the only assurance which could do any good.

Adella showed how sadly her nerves had been shaken by the events of the past few days, by snatching her hands away, rising to her feet with a passionate gesture, as she cried:

"Tell me, now! Speak out, or I'll hate you—please tell me!"

The lawyer smiled faintly at that abrupt change of tone and manner, but the sad appeal produced the effect desired, in the end.

"Sit down, dear child, and I'll tell you the latest sensation."

Adella complied, simply because her trembling limbs refused to support her weight. She had borne up nobly against bad news, but the mere hint of good tidings found her well-nigh powerless to meet it.

James Gibson, having carried that point, proceeded to tell her how the owner of the house in which Solomon Sober and his sister Hannah had lived, being desirous of rebuilding, had caused the ruins to be removed, as soon as the insurance question could be fairly settled.

"You know what I promised: to see that close watch should be kept, and any—any relics be sacredly preserved," Gibson added.

"They were—go on, I beg of you, cousin!" huskily said Adella.

"None such were found, but a vastly different discovery was made, and to that you owe this unexpected visit from me, 'Della,'" quickly added Gibson, his face flushing a bit, his keen eyes glittering with what appeared glad emotion. "And now, before going any further, let me say that I'm convinced both Ross Montgomery and old Sober escaped that night with their lives!"

A glad, yet choking cry broke from the maiden's lips, and, covering her face with both hands, she lay at length upon the sofa, sobbing, shivering, in an ecstasy of dizzy joy and wordless gratitude.

James Gibson leaned back in his chair, a smearing smile coming to curl his sensual lips, and a light which was bad to see, entering his eyes. Just then he seemed gloating over his victim!

Although she said nothing, he knew Adella was able to understand his words, just as she must be anxious to hear all. And in low, yet perfectly distinct tones, he went on:

"You know what this Solomon Sober really was—a detective, combining the qualities of a bloodhound, bull-dog and fox. And when he carried poor Montgomery into what appeared certain death from the roaring flames, he was acting with a deliberate forethought."

"He had constructed a passage underground, leading from the cellar of his house, across the yard, to the stables bordering on the alley. He carried Montgomery through this tunnel, and then stole away through the alley, unseen, unsuspected, even, until the removal of the debris unmasked that secret passage."

"But how—is it sure they both escaped?" asked Adella, lifting her head and sitting up, yielding to the joy which was rapidly restoring her bodily strength.

"I know that Sober escaped with life, for he has made himself known to a select few of his friends. If he escaped, why not Montgomery? If Ross was dead, would not there be some signs left?"

Adella gazed earnestly, imploringly into that hypocritical face, trying to read what those lips might be holding in reserve.

"There is more! You are keeping something back! Tell me all, or I will turn crazy!"

"What do you mean by 'all,' Adella?"

"You have seen—him? Or, at least, you have heard from him?"

Lawyer Gibson shook his head in negation.

"No, I've neither seen nor heard; but you—surely he'd not wait so long without letting you know how he fared! You surely must have heard from him, 'Della!'"

Her head was shaken, indicating the contrary. Just then the poor girl feared to trust her voice, her emotions were so strong.

James Gibson frowned darkly, his lids drooping. His right hand closed, making an almost savage gesture as he muttered, seemingly to himself rather than to the girl:

"Strange! One would think—can he be afraid? Is it because he is actually guilty, that he keeps so close?"

Adella gave an indignant start, one white hand swiftly brushing those slanderous lips as she caught his meaning.

"For shame, sir! How dare you even hint at such a thing? Guilty? Why, you know he is not, could not be guilty of such a foul deed!"

Gibson smiled faintly, but showed no signs of flinching or of repentance, speaking like one who had the courage of his convictions:

"I wish I could see matters through your eyes, cousin 'Della, but as a lawyer, and fairly well versed in human nature, I must say what I am forced to think: if Ross Montgomery is not guilty of murdering Austin, then he is taking the very course to make all the world deem him the criminal."

"Though all the world else proclaimed him guilty, still I would know him innocent," said Adella, more calmly, but with her eyes glowing

strongly. "You are his legal adviser, sworn to defend him to the best of your ability; why, then, are you trying to blacken his honor, sir?"

"I'll defend him before all the world, 'Della, when the proper time comes, but I must speak the truth to you, or else remain silent."

"Better silence, then!"

"Silence be it, then, after I've finished telling you what brought me out here this evening, 'Della,'" equably replied Gibson, in no manner disconcerted by her plain speaking. "It may be that you are right, and my professional instincts are at fault."

"As they surely are, when you couple the name of Ross Montgomery with such an atrocious crime!"

"Let it go at that, then, little woman. I certainly cannot afford to quarrel with you, over a point which must surely be proven, one way or the other, before many more weeks can creep by."

"What I wished to say is this: If Montgomery really escaped with life—and I carefully searched the premises, myself, without finding anything to show the contrary—he will almost certainly contrive to let you know where he is in hiding."

"If he does this, will you tell me? I ask it as his lawyer, who surely ought to be in possession of the inside facts."

"Yet you doubt his innocence!"

"Only in the absence of my client, remember, 'Della. Once let me see whom I am to defend, and his cause is mine, until the verdict is given."

"I ought to know more than Montgomery has told me; he was too badly shaken up for coherent speech, the only time I had an interview, you remember! But if he should send you word—"

The parlor door was rudely flung open, and several masked figures entered the room, the leader covering the lawyer with a cocked revolver, as he harshly rumbled:

"Stiddy, you! Chirp a chirp, an' I'll lift yer roof, cully!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

WHAT IS THE NEXT MOVE?

It was the outward semblance of Nipper Noll, but it was the voice of Ross Montgomery which answered back Old Sobersides, just then:

"One was there who acted as chief, but if he was really James Gibson, then his disguise was too complete for my eyes."

The Old-Style Detective tossed aside his battered felt hat, and took a seat, like one who is in no particular haste, after all.

"All that may be, son, yet the gentle Jimmy may have been beneath it all. Tell me just what you found out, please."

"Is there time? I fear still worse trouble is threatening Miss Palmer, and surely we ought to make sure—"

"Why do you worry on her account, in particular, Ross?"

"Because the chief took four picked men, and set off on important business, as he declared."

"He never came through Dolly Varden's, though?"

"No. They left the rendezvous by another door, and I failed when I tried to either join or follow them."

Old Sobersides was thoughtfully pinching his under lip, and it was plain to be seen he hardly relished the way matters were turning out.

Ross Montgomery hastily explained how he had attempted to bring about a more important capture, going so far as to at least partially turn dangerous suspicion his way, through showing a degree of nerve foreign to the character he was then playing.

Old Sobersides listened closely, but as the counterfeit Nipper Noll came to a conclusion, he hastened to reassure his young friend.

"Don't you think I was trying to fault you, son, for that's a long way from what I intended. Only, if we could have nipped that head imp, and only stripped off his disguise when he stood before Chief Zouche, I do reckon we'd be a powerful sight nearer the winning-post than we are now."

Ross Montgomery bowed his head, hiding face in hands. This was a blow that fell far more heavily on his head than upon the experienced detective, since Old Sobersides was in a measure case-hardened against temporary defeats, and whenever one such came his way, he merely made the best of it, and picked his flut for another trial.

With Montgomery it was different. Under the skillful hands of Old Sobersides he had been transformed into such a complete copy of Nipper Noll, whom he naturally resembled in build, height and complexion, that he entered upon that venture with high hopes—too high, as he had long since come to realize.

He had hoped to obtain proof by which those ugly suspicions against James Gibson might be forever set at rest—either by showing the lawyer's innocence, or through placing him under arrest while still in his disguise as the chief of that lawless gang.

Now he had failed, and all he had learned

simply increased his fears on account of Adella Palmer.

Old Sobersides frowned a bit as he noted that despairing action. He could make some allowance for the weakness produced by unusual excitement. He knew that Ross Montgomery had suffered intensely during the past week, not only in mind, but in body; he had lost much blood before the detective could get him away from the blazing house, to a place of safety where his wounds might be cared for.

Still this yielding was not what he wished to see in an aide of his, and he promptly interferred:

"Come, come, son! This'll never do! Put a brace on, or I'll know it's time for you to knock off work, and treat you accordingly."

Montgomery lifted his head, making a strong effort to rally. His eyes showed how heavy that disappointment had fallen upon him, but he was far from being broken down.

"I'm only waiting for you to decide upon the next move, Mr. Sober," he said, speaking with forced calmness. "If you are waiting for me to make the first suggestion, why—"

"I reckon I might give a tolerably close guess, son," lightly interposed Old Sobersides. "But I'm not so mighty sure that it'd be the right step to take first. Of course, though, there's one which we can't take, now."

"You mean making the raid?"

Sober nodded his assent, that frown coming back to his face.

"Just that, of course. I *did* count right smart on the haul we'd be able to make, but now the head-imp has given us the slip, to throw a net for any of the rest would simply be notifying him to scat for deeper water!"

"I did the best I knew how, Mr. Sober. If I could have stuck to the chief without ruining all by bringing on a fight, you may be sure I'd never have permitted him out of my sight."

"I am sure of it, boy, and you're only hurting us both by harping on that string. Drop it, can't you? I know you did as well as I could have done myself, and higher praise than that, no common man will ever pay you, be sure!"

The detective laughed softly at his own jest, and Montgomery felt grateful. He knew how strongly Old Sobersides had calculated on making a long step in advance that night, and for him to jest over the failure, was a remarkable proof of the strong attachment he felt for the spy whose mission had panned out so wretchedly.

Smothering his own burning wishes for the time being, Montgomery ventured a suggestion which he fancied more nearly accorded with the detective's desires.

"Why not question the crooks, sir? Surely you might wring the whole truth from at least one of them! If by no other means, by playing one against the other."

Old Sobersides shook his head, doubtfully.

"You don't fully realize what sort of an outfit this Brotherhood is, my son. I know there's not enough true grit among all three of those rascals to honestly equip a ten-year-old boy, but I believe you might torment them from now until next week, without forcing either man jack of 'em to squeal."

"Of course they'd say enough, such as it amounted to. They'd give lies enough to bury a mountain under. But as for letting drop any really important information concerning the Brotherhood, that they'd never do!"

"Willingly, of course not, but surely they could be made to confess! Such evil wretches are entitled to no consideration, as against honest folk. If you'll give me free play, I'll agree to make some one of them tell just who and what their chief is, sir!"

"You could, I reckon, if any one could," admitted Sober, taking full note of the stern fire which blazed in those black eyes. "But I know what experience has taught me, and if what you hinted a bit ago has any foundation on truth, there's hardly time for watching you play experiments which can't pan out better results."

"You mean my fears that some fresh peril menaces Miss Palmer?" the younger man asked, quickly.

"Yes. What makes you suspect anything of the sort, son?"

That was not such an easy question to answer. While calling for volunteers to serve on special duty, the chief of the Brotherhood had been careful not to let drop even a hint as to what move he intended making next.

Indeed, from the heat he had shown while denouncing Old Sobersides, and the urgent necessity which he declared existed for his speedy removal, the inference to be drawn from the chief's actions pointed toward man, not woman.

But Montgomery placed instinct above reason, just then, and spoke like one who feels no doubt as to the course which ought to be taken.

"You declare your firm belief that James Gibson is head of this lawless gang, don't you, sir?"

"Yes, son, but belief isn't proof—worse luck!"

"And you believe he is playing for the Palmer fortune?"

Old Sobersides nodded assent, little wrinkles coming about his keen eyes as he watched the young man. He was curious to see just how

good a case Montgomery might make out of his material.

"Well, then the inference is plain enough, surely! Call Gibson the chief. Say that he is after the Palmer fortune. Now—he knows that you certainly escaped with life from the flames. He feels sure you played the part of Major Mordaunt, to-day, since he as much as admitted that character originally belonged to himself.

"If you escaped, he reasoned that I did the same. Since you took such long chances to befriend me, you would trust me with your suspicions as to the actual murderer of poor Bainbridge. And with all this to work upon, wouldn't he know that he had little time to waste, unless he preferred abandoning his evil schemes against Miss Palmer entirely?"

"And you reason that he intends doing—just what, son?"

Then the young man's forced composure failed him, and his fears for that loved one were revealed in face and in voice.

"I fear for her—for Adella, my love!" he huskily cried, springing to his feet, his hands tightly clinched, his features twitching with powerful emotions. "I fear that devil means her evil this night!"

"Well, son, I'm bound to admit that you reason pretty fairly, for a novice at detective work, but I'm not so sure you're quite right as to the deduction you've drawn."

"Oh, don't talk, man, but act! I tell you Adella is in danger!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A LOVER'S FEARS.

THAT appeal was made almost fiercely, and Ross Montgomery paused before Old Sobersides, panting, half-beside himself with dread for the being whom his whole life-hope centered upon.

The detective gazed steadily into those feverish eyes, and little by little his stronger will asserted itself. Montgomery turned pale, and then his lids drooped, a slight shiver passing through his wiry frame.

"Sit down, son," coldly spoke the Old-Style Detective. "You're not fit for action, much less capable of advising your elders. Sit down, I say, unless you want me to drop this case right now and right here."

"I meant—I didn't mean—"

"Sit down, son!"

Montgomery obeyed, and instantly banishing the cold sternness which he had assumed for that purpose, Old Sobersides spoke kindly:

"You needed the curb, young man, but I'll let it slacken now, if you can promise you'll listen to cool reason for a bit; how is it?"

"I will listen, but—"

"Just lop off the 'but,' and let the rest stand, son. Now, you've set forth your ideas, and it's nothing more than right to ask you to give ear to my views, is it?"

"Just so—of course, sir, I'll listen."

"Just so I'll twist my views to match yours, eh? Well, I can't do precisely that, although I'm willing to humor your fancies, in turn."

"I can't think that Gibson (taking it for granted that he's really the high-muck-a-muck of the Brotherhood) would dare make a dangerous move toward the little woman, now that he must know we've both escaped with our lives. To do that would almost positively fix the whole business upon him, don't you see, son?"

It was a shrewd conclusion, and just such as an experienced detective would certainly draw from the facts made known, but Ross Montgomery was not so easily satisfied. He was listening to the warning of love, not the dictates of cold reason.

"You may be right, Mr. Sober, but I can't think that way. Gibson may be the chief, or he may not. If he is, he may think the risk less than the profit to be won by acting boldly and at once. With Adella out of the way, he will be able to grasp the fortune, and who can prove his hand was in it all?"

"You say none of the Brotherhood would dare confess; where else could we look for proof positive?"

Old Sobersides frowned, once more pinching his lip. He was still firm in his belief, but he could not help seeing how intensely in earnest his young friend was, and, after all, a lover's fears were hardly to be laughed at.

His decision was promptly taken, and he spoke again:

"That leaves us just as far apart as at the beginning, son, but I'll meet you half-way. If 'twill make you any easier in mind—and until you are, you'll be worse than useless as a worker in my line—I'll see that a reliable guard is placed over the Palmer Place, to be kept up night and day, until we've fairly won the victory. Will that do?"

"When? Now! Even while we're wasting time talking, that demon may be working his foul schemes to—Come, man!"

"Easy, or I'll not go a step, son," coolly declared Old Sobersides. "More than that, I'll not permit you to go, either."

Ross Montgomery flung back his head after the old proud fashion, but the detective never moved in his chair, simply saying:

"All the same, boy, I mean it. If you don't simmer down and act a bit more reasonable, I'll just turn you over to Chief Zouche, to be put where you can't botch what cooler heads are trying to bring about."

Montgomery had learned to know Old Sobersides well enough to feel that he meant all he said, once he assumed that tone and manner. He was fairly burning up with impatience, but he forced it under a mask, almost meekly resuming his chair, waiting for the decision.

Old Sobersides gave him an approving nod, then spoke again, in much more kindly tones:

"I don't relish such rough words, any more than you do, son, but I've got a great deal more at stake in this affair than you can readily give me credit for. Still, that can pass, for the present."

"Now, as for your fears concerning harm coming to the little lady. I can't look at that in your light, because I know Gibson, if he is really the head knave in this nasty mix, can't afford to run any such crazy risks as you hint at."

"If he played Major Mordaunt that night, be sure 'twas to help along the removal of poor Bainbridge, even if he didn't actually fire the shot that ended his life. And again, if Gibson acted that part, he must have known what my object was in adopting that same disguise to-day."

"Only Gibson, besides Pickett and Clark, of the Brotherhood, saw me at the Central. You say the chief virtually admitted that he did so see me, and knew me for a fraud, since the character belonged originally to himself?"

"Yes. He said he knew you must be Old Sobersides."

"Just so, son! Well, here's the point I'm trying to get at, first: He put Nipper Noll on my track. One whom he certainly accepted as Nipper Noll, reported that I was run to earth at the Planter's House. And the special duty for which their chief selected those things was to make sure Major Mordaunt never tells what he may have learned concerning either the Brotherhood or the killing of Austin Bainbridge."

Ross Montgomery could not deny that Old Sobersides had fairly made out his case, starting from that particular point of view; but instinct was still warring against reason, and he again begged his detective friend to at once take steps to guard the liberty, if not the life, of her who was dear to them both.

"It can do no harm, if it does no good," he concluded.

"I'm willing to humor you that far," said Old Sobersides, rising to his feet. "But we'll go call on the little lady first. If she consents to have such a guard posted, all right. I wouldn't take such a liberty without first securing her permission, though."

Ross Montgomery hardly heard those last sentences. The bare idea of seeing the woman whom he loved so passionately set his brain in a dizzy whirl, leaving room for nothing else.

Old Sobersides frowned a bit as he noted this fact, but he was a man, after all, and that frown faded away before a sad smile as a dim yet loved vision appeared before his misty eyes—the face and form of Adella's mother, who had twice wedded, was twice a widow, yet went down to her grave without ever knowing how tenderly she was adored by this burly, bluff, professional hunter of evil men.

Only lingering long enough to take a look after his latest captures, and making sure they could not escape during his absence, Old Sobersides gave Sister Hannah a few brief instructions, then left the house in company with his young friend.

Each of them wore the disguise assumed for the night, for while it would take time to restore their faces to their natural appearance, Solomon reasoned that they would run no great risks through playing the parts they had taken up.

"If you're right in your fears, son," he said, as they moved briskly along through town, heading for the Carondelet Road, "and those knaves are actually meditating harm to the little lady, we'll have all the bigger advantage over them, don't you see?"

"They'd take us for what we seem, not what we are!"

"Surely! And while the boss might feel ugly at finding you on his track, after bluffing you off as he did, back yonder, we'd be able to get inside his guard before he could smoke the truth!"

This notion struck Sober's fancy very strongly, and with a dry chuckle he declared that he wished Montgomery might prove correct in his fears.

"Just think! We could bag the head imp, and with him fairly in my grip I'd mighty soon break up the rest of the lawless gang!"

It was an attractive picture to Old Sobersides, and he recurred to it more than once during their rapid walk. But Montgomery had far different thoughts to busy his brain over.

How would Adella receive him? It would be their first meeting since that terrible night which witnessed the killing of Austin Bainbridge. Old Sobersides had assured him, time and again, that the maiden had perfect faith in

his innocence, but—would it bear the test of such a meeting?

If she only held full faith in him, the rest would be comparatively easy to bear. He could stand trial with a brave heart. Only—would Adella tell him those glad words?

It was a considerable distance to cover, and the night was only partially lighted up by the round moon; storm-clouds were drifting over its face, and at such times all was left dark and gloomy.

Busied with their thoughts, but little talking was done by the two men, and Old Sobersides found such pleasure in thinking over the capture of his arch-enemy that he instinctively acted as though that encounter was a certainty, limited only by their reaching the Palmer Place. And for that reason, he approached the grounds from the rear, instead of from the front. Then—

The wild, shrill scream of a woman broke upon their startled ears, and drawing their pistols, the two men dashed swiftly forward!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A TIMELY CHARGE.

ALTHOUGH Captain Frank Thornton failed to catch the shadow after which he spurred so briskly that night, he never forgot the first impression which that sight—real or imaginary—lent him.

He did not stop to reason it all out, from start to finish, as Old Sobersides might have done, nor did he think it necessary to first notify Adella Palmer, and secure her permission, but he straightway fell to work and took the precautions which he felt could do no harm, even if they accomplished no good in particular.

Military matters were very quiet in and immediately around St. Louis at that time, but a company of cavalry, and several of infantry, were stationed there, and over the former Thornton held full control.

Nothing was easier than for him to detail a few trusty fellows for "extra duty" each night, and as he paid them out of his own pocket, no very serious crime was committed by Thornton in so doing.

And leaving his sleep to catch up as best it might through the off hours of the day, Captain Frank Thornton put in his nights on guard over the heirs of Palmer Place.

Not that he had any suspicions which touched the actual truth, although he had no cause for greatly admiring James Gibson, and if put to question would never hesitate to declare Gibson much nearer an ideal assassin than was Ross Montgomery.

Still, he knew that, after night, the Place was very lonesome, and far from effectively policed. The papers had made the most of this, their latest local sensation, and in doing so, had greatly magnified the Palmer fortune.

"Offering a premium on burglary, confound them!" disgustedly declared the worthy officer, tossing aside the prints which gave him a plausible excuse for indulging himself in romantic guardianship.

Although nothing had transpired to confirm the suspicions installed by that human shadow, Captain Thornton never relaxed his vigilance, and the hour was close at hand when that foresight was to be fully justified.

This cold, dark, rayless guardianship would hardly have been endurable to a favored lover, but Frank Thornton was not that, and he had pretty well convinced himself he never would be, so far as Adella Palmer was concerned.

He had said but little which even approached the subject of love, since the night when he galloped over the Carondelet Road to bear such terrible tidings to the maiden; but, if his tongue had been chained, his eyes and his reasoning faculties had been free to do the work for which they were best fitted.

And, while it turned his heart very sore within him, Frank Thornton was man enough to look destiny squarely in the face. He saw that Ross Montgomery had won the rich prize, and that nothing save free confession from his own lips would ever make Adella believe in his guilt, or cause her love to abate one jot or tittle.

Every man at some time during his earlier life, likes to regard himself as (at least a bit of) a hero, and this universal weakness, perhaps, will explain why the captain nightly made his rounds, with Palmer Place as the center of observation.

On this night of which our record treats, one of his men brought word to the captain of a close back which was standing back of the grounds, seemingly without cause or reason.

And too thorough a soldier to shirk work because it might be a bit of extra trouble, Captain Thornton was just starting to investigate the matter, when the shrill scream of a woman broke upon the night air, followed immediately by another and another.

It was of no use asking from whence the alarm proceeded; the Palmer residence was the only building near enough, and fearing the worst was befalling his loved one, Frank Thornton bade his men follow at full speed, then dashed swiftly to the rescue.

Fortunately, they had not far to go, being at

the time only a few rods to the left of the main building, and those terrified echoes had scarcely time to die out before Thornton was at the house, glancing in at each lighted window as he sprung swiftly toward the front door.

He came to an abrupt pause at one of these windows from which the curtain had been drawn, for, through the clear glass, he caught sight of a woman struggling in the brutal grasp of a masked man.

The same glance showed him the flushed face of Mrs. Heaton, the worthy housekeeper, who was trying to free her lips from the dirty paw which covered them, its mate gripping viciously at her throat.

Just the one glance he took, then lifted the heavy revolver which he had drawn in readiness for use, covering that burly ruffian, sending a bullet through the glass and into the exposed side of Big Metcalfe.

With a howling yell of pain and fright, the thug released his victim, tearing at his side where fire seemed to be eating his vitals, then reeling back, to fall with a sudden thump upon the kitchen floor.

"In here, boys!" cried Thornton, drawing his saber and dashing both glass and sash to pieces as he spoke. "Make sure of him, then clear the house of all who can't prove their rights!"

Having opened the way for his men, Thornton rushed on to the front door, knee aiding hand in opening the barrier, giving him a glimpse of at least two other ruffians in mask as they were hurrying from the parlor toward the kitchen from whence that alarm had sprung.

"Halt! Surrender, or I'll—" began Captain Thornton, throwing up his pistol-hand to cover the enemy; but before he could do or say more, a battered felt hat came flying from one side, striking his hand and covering his weapon, for the instant baffling his aim.

"Down him, boys!" came a vicious cry, from that same direction, and Zenas Harvey, the spy and human shadow, darted upon the soldier with bared blade, striking as he came.

So swift was his coming, that, seeing only the masked ruffians directly in his front, Thornton might have fallen victim to that thirsty blade, only for one of his men, who had followed close at his heels.

"No ye don't, Johnny!" cried the cavalryman, springing forward and striking a downward blow with his saber. "Didn't I tell ye so?"

Full upon his bared crown fell the saber, and Zenas Harvey took up his last trail, a shadow indeed!

This swift action and swifter death was rather more than the two thugs had calculated upon, and with cries of terror, they turned to seek greater safety in flight, and as the nearest avenue open to them was through the parlor, they took that course, just as Thornton, shaking that blinding hat off his pistol, opened fire.

At the same instant James Gibson appeared at the parlor door, his face pale as that of a corpse, but his features contorted by vicious rage until even his closest friend would hardly have recognized the bland lawyer in this baffled villain.

Only one glance did he take, then slamming the door shut in the faces of his two men, the arch-villain sprung upon Adella Palmer, worse than murder glowing in his evil eyes.

With a lusty cheer as he disposed of one enemy, Private Murphy made ready for another as good stroke, his Irish blood fairly up with the sight of that flowing from other veins.

"Whurroo, ye divils!" he cried, charging as the thugs recoiled from that slamming door. "Down ye go, faith, av ye wor bigger nor the Hill o' Howth, thin!"

But Captain Thornton gave those rascals no further thought, just then. He had caught a glimpse of that other figure in the doorway, and now he heard Adella scream—heard her cry sharply for help, as only a woman can appeal when great peril menaces her.

He dashed forward, leaving the lesser ruffians to his men, two of whom came hurrying up at that juncture. He hurled himself bodily against the closed door, without stopping to try the knob. He burst it open, falling heavily as the resistance proved much less than he had expected.

Scrambling to his feet with the name of the maiden upon his lips, Thornton glared around the apartment; but it was unoccupied, save by himself!

Only for an instant did he pause, then sprung through the other door, knowing that the arch-villain surely must have fled by that channel, though he himself was ignorant of what might lie beyond.

This lack of knowledge might have proved very costly, since Captain Thornton lost his way, and lost several valuable moments while trying to gain the rear of the building. But the race of the evil ones was well-nigh done, and what the soldiers missed, others amended.

Driven nearly crazy by seeing his cherished scheme on the point of disastrous failure, just when he counted the risky game fairly won, James Gibson had caught Adella Palmer up in his strong arms, and dashing through the house, left it by a rear door, rushing at top speed through the kitchen-garden, heading for the

closed hack which he had stationed at a convenient spot on that side of Palmer Place.

But he was not to escape after that fashion; fortune had grown weary of favoring one so utterly vile, and now—

"Halt, you devil!" thundered a well-known voice, coming from directly in his path; and then—

It was Ross Montgomery whose hand sent the lead home, and as the arch-villain reeled before falling to earth, it was Ross Montgomery who caught Adella Palmer in his arms, covering her face with passionate kisses.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE LAST OF THE LEAGUE.

CAPTAIN FRANK THORNTON came up just in time to catch a glimpse of all this, under the light of the full moon, now sailing through a bit of cloudless sky.

Fortunately for all concerned, Old Sobersides was far more master of his nerves than any of the rest, else a greater tragedy might easily have followed close upon the heels of that just retribution; but he recognized the soldier's uniform, if not the soldier himself, and promptly called a truce.

Then all was made clear, and, between them, the two men who so deeply loved her bore Adella Palmer back to her house, where Mrs. Heaton, hysterical, perhaps, but still able to do her duty, was ready to assist her young mistress.

The fight had been fought, and a complete victory won.

Big Metcalfe lay dead in the kitchen, one great hand still clutching his side, where the fatal lead had bored its way to his heart.

Zenas Harvey lay with cloven skull in the hall.

His two comrades, both wounded, but not seriously, were lying near by, securely bound and under guard of Private Murphy and his fellow-soldiers.

Out under the stars, Old Sobersides was kneeling by the side of the villain who dropped before the lover's pistol, and never did warm friend work harder to restore consciousness than the Old-Style Detective labored over that wounded man.

Resigning Adella to the care of Mrs. Heaton and Ross Montgomery, whom he recognized in spite of the disguise still worn by the young Southerner, Captain Thornton returned to his immediate duty; bidding his men move both dead and captive thugs from the house which was desecrated by their presence, then going himself to look after the one who had so nearly snatched victory out of defeat.

Old Sobersides knew he might place full confidence in the officer, and quickly gave him to understand how much might depend upon keeping life in that frame until the truth could be extracted through his lips.

James Gibson was not slain, though he surely was hard hit. He was recovering his senses even before the soldiers were called to aid in removing him to the house, and by the time he was placed upon a cot, he could recognize those about him, and begin to realize all that his failure surely meant.

Long before this, Old Sobersides had dispatched one of the soldiers on horseback to the city, with a hastily-written word for Chief Zouche, or, in case he should be absent, for the officer in charge of the Central Station.

That note asked for a surgeon to be sent with all possible speed, and begged Chief Zouche to bear him company, if possible.

But while waiting for their arrival, Old Sobersides fell to work, doing all that lay in his power for the wounded schemer.

This was but little, save bandaging his wound, and giving him little sips of wine, to keep up his strength.

"He's bound to make a die of it, I'm afraid," he said, in an aside, to Ross Montgomery and Captain Thornton. "I'm going to get him to own up, if possible, lest he hop the twig before the chief can get here. You had better keep out of his sight, son, for your face may make him lock his teeth too tightly for my hopes."

As one far less likely to prove objectionable on that score, Old Sobersides asked Captain Thornton to remain as a possible witness to the confession, if one might be extracted from the criminal.

That confession was not an easy one to extort. Although he must have felt his earthly race was well-nigh run, James Gibson was not yet weakened enough to condemn himself. But Old Sobersides was patient, and handled him with a rare tact.

Almost before the sinner realized as much he had damned himself, sufficiently plain for all purposes, with reputable witnesses ready to make oath to his words.

But Old Sobersides was not satisfied with that, and hailed the coming of Chief Zouche, together with the police surgeon, with rapture.

A more thorough examination proved the wound almost certainly a mortal one, and, having cared for the sufferer as well as might be, the police surgeon gravely broke the tidings to Gibson.

Up to that instant he had clung to both hope and life, but as he read the truth, even more plainly in those serious eyes than in words or tone, his strong will broke, and he told everything.

There is no necessity for giving a literal transcript of the confession which came from his lips, to be swiftly jotted down by the practiced hand of Chief Zouche.

The greater part of what he revealed has already been recorded here, and the remaining items have at least been shadowed forth.

James Gibson admitted his identity with the chief of the Brotherhood of Bullet and Steel. He also acknowledged that he had played the part of Major Adelbert Mordaunt on the night which witnessed the killing of Austin Bainbridge.

When he assumed that disguise—particularly useful in those warlike times, when the entire country was full of soldiers—he had no idea of using it as he afterward did; that stroke was suggested by the double collision which took place between Ross Montgomery and Austin Bainbridge.

Old Sobersides had been correct in his reasoning: the Brotherhood was to be used as a means of placing the leader of the St. Louis branch in full possession of the Palmer fortune, out of which transaction, of course, the members were to reap a certain benefit.

The first step was to remove Austin Bainbridge, and in this quarrel, with the fierce threats which many could bear witness Ross Montgomery used against his temporary conqueror, Gibson saw the very opportunity for which he had so long been scheming.

Before joining Bainbridge, he saw Nipper Noll and Nosey Clark, giving them their instructions, binding them by the oath of the League to faithfully perform the part assigned them.

And then, when in a retired spot, James Gibson, as Major Mordaunt, shot his victim, leaving him lying under the lamplight, seeking his own safety before his tools gave the alarm, as already recorded.

Having secured this part of the confession, and caused James Gibson to sign it after hearing Chief Zouche read it over, less haste was shown in gleaned other important facts.

But only Chief Zouche, the police surgeon, and Old Sobersides remained within hearing. Now that Ross Montgomery had been fully cleared, no other witnesses were desired, for the fewer ears to catch those condemning words, the less liable the criminals still at large, would be to gain wind of their peril.

Of all that James Gibson let fall during the remaining hours of that night, little need be said here. Enough that he gave full and valuable information concerning the Brotherhood, including names and plots which were still in abeyance.

As Old Sobersides said, with one of his characteristic chuckles, James Gibson, while dying, did more service to the honest part of mankind, than in all his life before.

"It's a mighty good night's work as it stands, but—I'd really like to see him pull through, to stand his trial! Just think! Why, man, dear, it'd be well worth retiring on! It'd be the cap-sheaf of my career, chief!"

"Well, you'll receive just as much credit as it is, Sober," replied that official. "And as for retiring, the profession can't afford to lose you for many a long year to come!"

As the sun showed its first rays, the life passed out from that body. James Gibson died without a struggle, having been unconscious for several hours before the actual ending came.

Captain Frank Thornton had but a single brief interview with Adella Palmer. He knew that his hopes were worse than vain, and like a true man he bore the blow. And, like a true soldier, he applied for a change from recruiting to the field, speedily obtaining his wishes. And, we are pleased to state, he met the family of his fortunate rival, in their Southern home. And, too, he sought one of those fair sisters out, long after the end of the war, to make her his bride!

Old Sobersides, aided by Chief Zouche and the police, quickly bagged the members of the Brotherhood, and saw them safely cared for, doing the State service, "up the river." Among the lot were Nipper Noll, Nosey Clark, and Billy the Banker, as a matter of course.

Ross Montgomery surrendered for trial, but at his preliminary examination he was declared innocent of all charges, and when another year rolled around, it found Adella Palmer, Mrs. Ross Montgomery.

Old Sobersides remained in the profession, and proved of great service in many another wicked case, but none of them gave him more complete satisfaction than that which has been given in these chapters.

Although well along in years, he is still in harness, and still living with his sister Hannah. She, too, is older, of course, but that is the only change to be recorded in her.

If necessary, she could still "administer bird-shot" as bravely as she did in those long-past days!

THE END.

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